ONLINE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT PROVIDERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A REVELATORY CASE STUDY ON VALUE CO-CREATION

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Britta Lyn Svoboda

December 2022

ABSTRACT

With an increase in distance learning and online degree programs, many higher education institutions have partnered with online program management (OPM) providers, leading to a dramatic growth of the OPM industry over the past decade. The purpose of this study was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of entities of higher education partnering with OPMs through an in-depth, revelatory case study of value co-creation as experienced in the partnership between a doctoral research institution, specifically an academic department, and its OPM provider. The following research question guided this study: *How does an OPM co-create value with an institutional partner?* The partnership was analyzed to unveil how the academic department and OPM operated within their partnership, and findings revealed how and to what extent the partnership revealed the dimensional elements of value co-creation. A rich description is provided along with findings to promote transferability for institutional administrators and policymakers. Findings have implications for the future of distance education and higher education practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 1
- **Introduction and Background** 1
- **Problem Statement** 5
- **Significance** 6
- **Research Question and Purpose of Study** 6
- **Overview of Methodology** 7
- **Overview of Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks** 8
- **Terminology** 10
- **Organization of the Dissertation** 15

CHAPTER 2 16
- **Introduction to Chapter** 16
- **Historical Overview of Distance Education** 16
  - **First Generation: Correspondence Study** 16
  - **Second Generation: Broadcast Radio and Television** 18
  - **Third Generation: AIM and Open Universities** 19
  - **Fourth Generation: Teleconferencing** 20
  - **Fifth Generation: Internet-Based Education** 21
  - **Distance Education Today** 22
- **Online Program Management Providers (OPM)** 25
  - **OPM Landscape Today** 25
  - **University Risk with OPMs** 27
  - **For-Profit Higher Education** 28
  - **Outsourcing** 30
  - **Existing Empirical Research on OPMs** 31
- **Theoretical Framework** 32
  - **Philosophical Worldview** 32
  - **Higher Education as a Business** 32
  - **Interorganizational Theories** 34
  - **Value Co-Creation** 36
  - **VCC in Higher Education** 42

Chapter Summary 43
CHAPTER 3 44
Introduction to Chapter 44
Methodology 44
Case Context 45
Data Sources 46
Data Collection 48
Data Analysis 50
Enhancement of Study Quality 52
Validity Strategies 52
Reliability Strategies 54
Positionality and Ethical Considerations 54
Limitations 56
Chapter Summary 56
CHAPTER 4 58
Introduction to Chapter 58
Summary of Analyses 58
Partnership Overview 60
OPM Overview 60
Academic Department Overview 63
Partnership Functionality 64
OPM and Academic Department Perceptions of Value 69
Student Perception of Value 75
Net Promotor Scores 76
Convergent Analysis 78
Graduate Exit and Alumni Survey Results 86
Chapter Summary 88
CHAPTER 5 89
Introduction to Chapter 89
Answering the Research Question with VCC 90
Implications for Higher Education 93
Considerations for Community and Support 95

Increased Competition and Resource Inequities 96
Faculty and Personnel Considerations 97
Transferability 98
Recommendations for Future Research 100
Conclusion 101
REFERENCES 103
APPENDICES 116
VITA 127

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Philosophical Paradigms for OPM Providers and Higher Education: A Revelatory Case Study on Value Co-Creation ……... 33

Table 3.1: Data Source Perspective Objectives ……... 47

Table 4.1: OPM and Academic Department Partnership Functionality …….. 65

Table 4.2: Program Net Promoter Scores Per Student Intake …….. 77

Table 4.3: Beginning of Term Quantitative Survey Results …… 79

Table 4.4: End of Term Quantitative Survey Results …….. 80

Table 4.5: Convergent Analysis Results Joint Display …… 81

Table 4.6: Graduate Exit Quantitative Survey Results …… 87

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Foundational Value Co-Creation Conceptual Model …… 38

Figure 2.2: Adapted Value Co-Creation Model: VCC Conceptual Model for Dissertation …… 41

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Background

Higher education environments and course delivery strategies continuously progress. Distance education in the United States began in the 1850s (Casey, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012), and as technological, social, and economic advances have occurred throughout history, distance education evolved into online education (Casey, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Saba, 2011). According to the Babson Survey Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2017), enrollments in distance education consistently have increased over the past 15 years, regardless of the economy's position. "The growth of distance enrollment has been relentless," stated to Julia E. Seaman (2016, para. 2), research director of the Babson Survey Research Group. Online student enrollment increased from about 5.5 million out of 20.8 million total students in 2013 to about 14 million out of 19.4 million in 2020 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). Almost three-quarters of college students in the United States were enrolled in an education program offered at least partially online in 2020 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022).

Once the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic hit in 2020, institutions were forced to offer curriculum virtually and remotely, sparking a renewed interest and global spotlight on online education. Data from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics and the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) suggested an initial picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped postsecondary enrollment patterns during fall 2020. Roughly 2,200 institutions that participate in NC-SARA reported a 93%

increase in exclusively online enrollment, from 3,016,944 in 2019 to 5,825,723 in 2020[1]. Furthermore, majority of NC-SARA institutions indicated they expect to continue offering distance education options post-pandemic (Lederman, 2021).

Such rapid growth in distance education enrollments has created increased possibilities for online learning, including organizational restructuring and enrollment expansion. While most U.S. institutions have adopted technologies to assist in distance education, too few decisions have revolved around innovative course delivery and design (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2021). While some institutions and degree programs have attempted to develop and deliver online programs internally, many institutions do not have the expertise or resources to develop and maintain online programs (Murray, 2019). Consequently, many institutions have partnered with online program management (OPM) providers, leading to a dramatic growth of the OPM industry over the past decade (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018; Pelletier, 2018).

OPM providers, also referred to as OPMs, are for-profit organizations that help higher education institutions as third-party vendors to assist development and maintenance of online programs using tuition revenue-sharing (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018) or fee-for-service business models (Hill, 2021). OPMs provide an array of services including but not limited to marketing, recruitment, enrollment management, curriculum development, online course design, student retention support, creation of online orientations, and technology infrastructure (Hill, 2018).

[1] The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) is a private nonprofit organization that helps expand students' access to educational opportunities and ensure more efficient, consistent, and effective regulation of distance education programs. Recognizing the growing demand for distance education opportunities, higher education stakeholders – including state regulators and education leaders, accreditors, the U.S. Department of Education, and institutions – joined together in 2013 to establish the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA), which streamline regulations around distance education programs. Today, 49 member states (excluding California), the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands all voluntarily participate in SARA (NC-SARA, 2022).

Historically, traditional campus-based institutions have not had the experience or organizational capability to fully support online programs, especially programs that most often serve nontraditional students (Hill, 2018). OPM providers most often support graduate level programs, which typically engage a nontraditional student population (Hill, 2018).

Online education analysts suggest that the number of online programs grew 110% and the number of institutions working with OPM providers grew by more than 130% between 2011 and 2015 (Lurie, 2017). While the exact number of OPM arrangements is unknown due to lack of comprehensive data, more than 550 institutions worked with an OPM to support at least 2,900 education programs (e.g., certificate and degree programs) as of July 2021 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). About 90% of these institutions are public or nonprofit (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). Eduventures, a leader in higher education research, projected that the OPM market would grow to $2.5 billion by 2020 (ICEF, 2015; Pelletier, 2018), yet the market exceeded expectations to $3.5 billion in 2019. A 2019 global report conducted by HolonIQ, a global education market intelligence platform, predicted the OPM market will reach $7.8 billion by 2025. The report was based on a dataset of more than 4,900 online programs at over 300 universities globally.

Regardless the growth of OPM arrangements, there are considerable risks involved with institutional partnership with OPMs. Some government officials have questioned the quality and legality of OPM business practices, particularly with tuition revenue-sharing arrangements and overall compliance to the Higher Education Act's incentive compensation ban, which was designed to prevent abusive recruiting practices (McKenzie, 2020). The United States Government Accountability Office released a report to Congressional requestors that examined institutional use of OPMs and the extent to which the Department of Education's monitoring

instructions ensured that it obtains the information needed to assess whether OPM arrangements comply with the incentive compensation ban (2022). The United States Government Accountability Office concluded a need for stronger monitoring of OPM arrangements as there were no data to infer compliance or lack thereof (2022).

Relatedly, quality of postsecondary education and institutional accountability remain a forefront concept amongst stakeholders and policymakers. Quality and return on investment are critical to stakeholders in higher education, and institutional leaders must be accountable for resources used and results achieved (Hillman, 2006; Powell et al., 2012; Shelton, 2011). Institutional leaders are challenged and encouraged to be innovative, efficient, and effective in achieving desired student outcomes. While partnering with an OPM may increase innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness, these arrangements may be a very expensive investment. Whether an OPM utilizes a tuition revenue-sharing or fee-for-service business model, investments in partnerships are complex as a collaboration between OPM and institutional agents (Maloney & Kim, 2021). In addition to the cost of OPM services, there are fixed and overhead costs. Institutions have internal costs to run and manage a certificate or degree program, including faculty and personnel to oversee program initiatives. Assuming the OPM-supported programs are successful, revenue may cover costs and grow internal capacity, but there is a risk programs will not succeed (Maloney & Kim, 2021).

Regardless, higher education administrators and institutions continue to partner with OPMs in increasing numbers, suggesting a strong value proposition. Originating in the marketing community, a customer value proposition is “a strategic tool facilitating communication of an organization’s ability to share resources and offer a superior value package to targeted customers” (Payne et al., 2017). A value proposition is crucial to the value creation process

(Payne & Frow, 2005) and significantly affects the desired performance of a partnership because it outlines expectations (Payne et al., 2017). This definition suggests that the value proposition of OPMs is to help institutions or academic colleges achieve results and accountability; they co-create conditional, perceived value. If this is the case, the process of value co-creation in these partnerships is not clearly examined within higher education research.

The intersection of the increase in partnerships with OPMs to meet the demand for postsecondary online education and the examination of perceived value of OPM partnerships is the focus of this dissertation. The postsecondary and distance education market is evolving, but there are risks associated with partnering with an OPM. Research on the potential value of OPM partnerships (i.e., value proposition and value co-creation) within the higher education environment is warranted to increase transparency on the revelation and evolution of these partnerships.

Problem Statement

Extensive research has been conducted on distance education and online learning over the past few decades as technology has evolved (Casey, 2008; Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2021; Courtney & Whilhoite-Mathews, 2015; Lassonde, 2014) and enrollment in online programs has increased (Lederman, 2021). Institutional leaders are challenged and encouraged to be innovative, efficient, and effective in achieving enrollment growth and desired student outcomes. However, historically, traditional campus-based institutions have not had the experience or organizational capability to fully support online programs (Hill, 2018), which has resulted in the growth and use of OPM providers.

While the OPM industry dramatically grew over the past decade (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018; Pelletier, 2018), the use of OPM services in higher education is an ongoing conversation in

federal government, media, and opinion blogs. Proponents of OPMs have shared benefits such as increased enrollment and instructional design support, while others have criticized the contract practices and costs of OPMs. To date, there is no empirical research about the value of university-OPM degree program partnerships. Maloney and Kim (2021) suggested greater transparency is needed to assess risk and reward (i.e., value proposition) related to decisions to partner and operate with OPMs. As more higher education leaders turn to OPMs to help grow and manage online programs, research on the suggested value of these partnerships is needed.

Significance

Value co-creation has been extensively studied within business research (Ranjan & Read, 2016). However, in educational research, it has minimally been explored, and only between the student and the institution. This study will be revelatory, examining the value co-creation process between an OPM and higher education agents, specifically at the academic department level, to better understand the value proposition of these partnerships. Findings will inform higher education leaders as they decide whether to pursue OPM partnerships as distance education continues to evolve. Partnering with an OPM may be a very expensive investment, and an evaluation of a partnership may help justify or address costs. Additionally, findings will help further explore accountability and the future of higher education practices, especially regarding distance education.

Research Question and Purpose of Study

Higher education administrators and institutions continue to partner with OPMs, suggesting there is a value proposition related to these arrangements. A customer value proposition is "a strategic tool facilitating communication of an organization's ability to share resources and offer a superior value package to targeted customers" (Payne et al., 2017, p. 472).

A value proposition is crucial to the value creation process (Payne & Frow, 2005) with significant performance implications because it outlines desired expectations (Payne et al.). This definition suggests that the value proposition of OPMs is they help institutions or academic colleges, departments, or programs achieve results and accountability; they create conditional, perceived value. However, because academic programs are still institutional initiatives, they are never fully outsourced and require collaboration (Maloney & Kim, 2021). Therefore, the following research question will guide this study: *How does an OPM co-create value with an institutional partner?*

The purpose of this study was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of entities of higher education partnering with OPMs. I accomplished this objective through an in-depth, revelatory case study of value co-creation as experienced in the partnership between a doctoral research institution, specifically an academic department, and its OPM provider. The partnership was analyzed to unveil how the academic department and OPM operated within their partnership and to what extent the partnership revealed the dimensional elements of value co-creation. A rich description is provided along with findings to promote transferability for institutional administrators and policymakers. Findings have implications for the future of distance education and higher education practices.

Overview of Methodology

This dissertation is a revelatory case study in which a phenomenon previously inaccessible to social science inquiry is observed and analyzed (Yin, 2018). Yin defined a case study as "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). With case studies, researchers explore one or

more contemporary bounded systems through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of evidence (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). This study is a within-site study, meaning a single case was studied (Creswell, 2013). It is also an intrinsic case study because it "has unusual interest in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed" (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). The case for this study is the partnership between an academic department at a doctoral research institution and its OPM, specifically from Spring 2019 to Spring 2022.

I conducted a holistic analysis of the case. The analysis is rich in the context of the case (Creswell, 2013) as I detailed a brief history of the partnership, the structure of and roles interacting in the partnership, and a description of the OPM and services. Further, I analyzed the following multiple sources of data to investigate the research question:

1. *Archival record analysis*: Student survey data, including data from first-term surveys, graduation exit surveys, and alumni surveys from Fall 2019 to Spring 2022
2. *Document analysis:* The academic college website and the OPM website
3. *Participant-observations*: Participant-observations of partnership meetings

Specific details about the case context and site and methods of the data collection process and analyses are further described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Overview of Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

I approached this study using a pragmatic interpretive framework, where I focused on the outcomes of research (Creswell, 2013). Using this worldview, multiple methods and sources of data collection were sought to best answer the research question, and practical implications of research were emphasized (Creswell, 2013). Pragmatism is reflected through multiple

philosophical paradigms (i.e., ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological), which are further discussed in Chapter 2. Additionally, this dissertation heavily relied on Yin's work (2018) for terminology, definitions, and systematic approaches for conducting research.

Furthermore, this study assumed that institutions of higher education (and their agents) function like a business. This assumption is rooted in and supported by neoliberalism, which has become the dominant ideology in the United States since the 1970s (Saunders, 2010). Under this ideology, revenue generation is prioritized in higher education, institutions are reliant on private sources of funding (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and economic efficiency extends into institutional decision-making (Ayers, 2004; Currie, 1998; Eckel, 2000; Gumport, 1993).

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks assisted in laying a foundation for understanding partnerships such as that between an academic department and an OPM provider. Cooperative interorganizational relationships are critical to business practice worldwide; therefore, these relationships are used for a variety of purposes, including product supply, research, new product development, market access, and production (Jap & Anderson, 2007). Interorganizational theories are well cited in empirical business research (Alexander, 1995; Benson, 1975; Drees & Heugens, 2013; Galbraith, 1973; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Vivek et al., 2021). Exchange theory, contingency theory, resource-advantage theory, and resource dependence theory are described as overlapping theoretical frameworks to guide this study.

While these theories, rooted in business and management disciplines, suggest the potential reason and nature of the partnership between an academic department and an OPM, the root of the value proposition is not as clear. Because this study aimed to more thoroughly understand *how* the partnership operates to bring value to each entity of the partnership, a more

specific conceptual model was needed. The conceptual framework that guided this study is and of itself referred to as value co-creation.

Value co-creation (VCC) is essentially when consumers (e.g., academic department) assume an active role and create value together with the supplier organization (e.g., OPM) "through direct and indirect collaboration across one or more stages of production and consumption" (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 291). It has gained the attention of academics and practitioners as an overarching concept describing collaboration between multiple stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Ranjan and Read (2016) identified the two main theoretical dimensions of VCC (i.e., co-production and value-in-use) and three conceptual elements fundamental to each dimension (i.e., knowledge, equity, interaction; experience, personalization, relationship). Together, the theoretical dimensions and conceptual elements are essential for the co-creation of value for both entities of a partnership. This framework is elaborated further in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Terminology

The following terms, presented in alphabetical order for easy reference, are used throughout the study and have been provided to ensure understanding and consistency.

Asynchronous learning: Asynchronous learning refers to forms of education, instruction, and learning that do not occur in the same place or at the same time. Participants of asynchronous education may contribute at the times, places, and pace that is convenient for them (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005). Examples of asynchronous learning may include a wide variety of instructional interactions, including email exchanges, online discussion boards, prerecorded video lessons,

game-based learning tasks, and LMS platforms that organize instructional materials and interactions.

Co-production: Co-production is a process in which consumers integrate their resources (e.g., knowledge, experiences, opinions) very early in the phase of creation and production of a service or product (Lusch & Vargo, 2006).

Distance education: Distance education, and similarly distance learning, has been referred to with numerous terms throughout history, including but not limited to online teaching and learning, distributed education, extension education, blended learning, mobile learning, and e-learning (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015; Hodges et al., 2020). Before the Internet, distance education was essentially any type of teaching and learning done at a distance (i.e., not face-to-face instruction). Today, it is defined in its simplest form as "Internet-based learning that delivers content and enables communication between instructor and students" (Cleveland-Innes, 2021, p. 4). Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process (Casey, 2008), enhancing learning and interactivity in either synchronous or asynchronous environments (Singh & Thurman, 2019). This study will interchangeably use distance education/distance learning with online education/online learning. Effective distance education and online learning results from "careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development" (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 7).

Flipped classroom: A flipped classroom is a teaching methodology in which the traditional class setting is inverted. Classroom time focuses on application of topics and is utilized to solve problems or think practically through the discussion and peer collaboration of students and instructors, while any lecture related techniques are presented outside of synchronous class time. This instructional methodology claims that flipping your classroom engages students more effectively with the learning process, achieving better teaching results (Gonzalez-Gomez, 2016).

Learning Management System (LMS): A Learning Management System (LMS) is a software tool used to deliver learning content and resources to users. While also used in the business sector, one out of five LMS implementations occurs in the education field at all educational levels. A LMS offers ease to instructors in delivering study material, monitoring learner participation, and assessing performance, and is therefore a popular tool used in higher education (Hurix, 2020). A LMS can be used to manage educational activities, such as creating and delivering instructional content, assessing students, analyzing data, tracking student progress, collaborating on projects, and making learning interactive and engaging (Solanki, 2022).

Net Promoter Score (NPS): Net promoter score (NPS) is often held as the gold standard of customer experience metrics. First developed in 2013 by Bain and Company, it is now used by millions of businesses to measure and track customer perceptions on the company, its products, or its services. NPS is based on one question: “How likely is it that you would recommend [organization/product/service] to a friend or colleague?” Scores are reported with a number from the range -100 to +100, with a higher positive score being desirable (Qualtrics, 2022). General

guidelines in the United States indicate that any NPS above 0 is “good,” above 20 is “favorable,” above 50 is “excellent,” and above 80 is “world class” (Perspective, 2019).

Online program: While many individual courses may be online, this study will focus on fully online degree programs in which all courses in the degree are online. For this study, an online program is a distance education degree program intentionally designed for distance learning, whether it is delivered in an exclusive asynchronous format, an exclusive synchronous format, or as a mixture of both asynchronous and synchronous formats occurring online.

Online Program Manager/Management (OPM): OPMs are for-profit organizations that help higher education institutions develop and maintain online programs using either a revenue-sharing model or a fee-for-services financial model (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018). These companies provide an array of services including but not limited to marketing, recruitment, enrollment management, curriculum development, online course design, student retention support, creation of online orientations, and technology infrastructure (Hill, 2018).

Synchronous learning: Synchronous learning refers to forms of education, instruction, and learning that occur at the same time, regardless of location. Interactions are occurring in real-time (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005). In the instance of distance education, synchronous learning can occur in real-time but not in person or face-to-face. Examples of synchronous learning in distance education may include a wide variety of instructional interactions, including educational video conferences and meetings (e.g., Zoom, Skype, etc.), interactive webinars, chat-based online discussions, and lectures that are broadcast at the same time they delivered.

Value: Value has two main components: *Perceived use value* is subjective and defined by consumers/customers based on their perceptions of the usefulness of the product/service offered. Perceptions of value of a product/service are based on the consumers' beliefs about the product/service, as well as their needs, unique experiences, wants, and expectations. *Exchange value* refers to price; it is the monetary amount realized at the point of sale (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000).

Value co-creation: Value co-creation (VCC) is process in which partner organizations integrate resources to facilitate a range of activities, products, and experiences that encourage exchange and interaction, which can lead to better practice and innovation (Prahalad & Ramasway, 2004).

Value-in-use (ViU): Value-in-use (ViU) is the result of perceived value for both consumers and organizations once they start using a co-produced service or product (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Value proposition: Originating in the marketing community, a customer value proposition is "a strategic tool facilitating communication of an organization's ability to share resources and offer a superior value package to targeted customers" (Payne et al., 2017, p. 472). A value proposition is crucial to the value creation process (Payne & Frow, 2005) with significant performance implications because it outlines desired expectations (Payne et al.).

Virtual/remote learning: While online programs have virtual, remote elements ingrained in their designs, virtual and/or remote learning refers to education not intentionally designed to be

delivered online but due to extenuating or emergency circumstances is being taught in a virtual or remote setting (Hodges et al., 2020).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the overall study by highlighting the context, the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, the research question, the overview of the methodology of the study, and an introduction to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide this study. It also provided clarification of key terminology used within the study.

Chapter 2 outlines the empirical research and literature to support this study, including a contextual overview of the history of distance education and evolvement of OPMs in the United States, a description on the OPM landscape today, and existing research related to OPMs, outsourcing, and for-profit companies in higher education. Additionally, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study are reviewed in greater detail.

Chapter 3 details the research methods used in the study, including the data sources, overall research design, the specific case analyzed, data analysis procedures conducted, and steps taken to ensure study credibility and ethical results. Study limitations are also addressed.

Chapter 4 details the findings of the analyses to address the study's research question. Chapter 5 interprets the findings of the study and situates them within the literature as well as analyzes them within the lens of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The chapter discusses implications of the findings for best practices and considerations. Furthermore, future research recommendations are provided.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction to Chapter

To enhance the scope of understanding for this study, literature on distance education and interorganizational partnerships were examined. Furthermore, the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks are described as a lens to guide the research question, data analyses of findings, and overall discussion. Specifically, this chapter explores the following topics: (a) a historical overview of distance education; (b) an overview of OPMs, including the current landscape of the industry and existing but incomplete literature about higher education institutions partnering with OPMs; and (c) the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study.

Historical Overview of Distance Education

To better understand distance education and online programs, it is important to examine its historical evolution. As technological, social, and economic advances have occurred throughout history, online education has likewise progressed (Casey, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Saba, 2011). There are five generations of educational advancement, including correspondence study, broadcast radio and television programming, AIM and open universities, teleconferencing, and internet-based education. Even still, distance education constantly evolves, and a description about how distance education presently functions is also addressed.

First Generation: Correspondence Study

Distance education in the United States dates to the early 1850s in the form of correspondence courses (Casey, 2008; Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). This form of education was comprised of mailing print-based assignments and instructor feedback. With the advancement of printing (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015), as well as the expansion of

postal services and railways, this form of education became a popular way to provide education to underserved populations that would not otherwise have access to education, including women (Casey, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The curricula of most correspondence schools were designed to help the common person to access education, often for developing vocational and farming skills (Saba, 2011). This form of education was self-directed and self-initiated with inhibiting factors such as slow delivery and communication (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015). Regardless, distance education achieved academic recognition in 1892 when the University of Chicago created the first college-level distance learning program (Casey, 2008). There were over 200 correspondence schools between the 1890s and 1930s (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). In the 1940s, correspondence education became popular in the Armed Forces, allowing more than seven million service members the opportunity to take high school courses. Further, approximately 261,222 individuals in the Armed Forces were enrolled in college courses before the United States Armed Forces Institute closed in 1974 (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

The quality of education ranged from very good to fraudulent shams. The schools that engaged in deceptive practices damaged the reputation of distance education. The federal government withdrew its financial support for students in such schools and established rules that limited correspondence practices in the 1950s. Although reputable faculty and administrators practiced correspondence education in state-supported institutions of higher education, the practice did not earn a reputation of quality teaching or learning (Saba, 2011). However, during the 1960s, distance education was reconsidered as the civil rights movement highlighted the deprivation of learning for inner city children (Saba, 2011). This concern emphasized the concurrent advancement of educational broadcasting at that time.

Second Generation: Broadcast Radio and Television

As the 20th century evolved, education by radio and television evolved in parallel with correspondence education. In 1921, radio emerged as an educational technology in the United States for all levels of education, including postsecondary education. The federal government issued the first educational radio license to the Latter Day Saints' University of Salt Lake in 1921, and in 1922 the University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota received licenses to establish educational radio stations (Saba, 2011). However, the use of radio as an educational technology only continued through the 1930s because it did not meet expectations (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Like correspondence education, this medium focused more on production and distribution of teaching and learning materials, with little or no opportunity for two-way communication between teacher and learner (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015). Additional issues with the medium included that listening developed a sense of intellectual inaction or nonparticipation, there was difficulty adjusting broadcast times to course schedules and instruction to individual needs, programs were not developed by educators (nor were they based on school curriculum), and listening was noted as less effective than face-to-face learning due to the lack of facial expressions and gestures (Saba, 2011).

The transition from radio into educational television broadcasting began in the late 1930s during World War II (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). During this time, more television channels became available (Lessonde, 2014). In 1945, Iowa State University applied to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for an educational television (ETV) license, and the institution became the first ETV broadcaster in the world, televising educational programs by 1950 (Saba, 2011). Cable television started as early as 1952, and in 1962, the construction of ETV stations was federally funded. Further, by 1972 every cable company was

required by the FCC to provide an educational channel, referred to as “telecourses” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement highlighted the deprivation of learning for inner city children (Saba, 2011). This concern led to the establishment of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CBP). These organizations were tasked with funding production and broadcast of educational programs (Saba, 2011). Perhaps the best known and the most successful program funded by CPB is Sesame Street, which continues to the present day. Sesame Street has reached millions of pre-school children throughout the country on PBS affiliated television stations, offering early education in language development and mathematical thinking (Saba, 2011). Nevertheless, by the end of the 1970s there were about 150 ETV stations broadcasting instructional TV programs ranging from K-12 through postsecondary education throughout the country (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). By the mid-1980s “there were around 200 college-level telecourses produced by universities, community colleges, private producers, and public and commercial broadcasting stations” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 31). It was also popular practice for students to call their instructors by phone and get questions answered on air in real time (Gershon, 2020).

Third Generation: AIM and Open Universities

In the 1960s, the Carnegie Foundation funded work by Charles Wedemeyer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to figure out how to best reach students at a distance (Gershon, 2020). This evolved into the Articulated Instructional Media Program (AIM), a special degree program for adults at the University of Wisconsin, which existed from 1964-1968 (Wedemeyer & Najem, 1969). AIM was an experiment using a total systems approach to combine various communication technologies to provide high-quality education at a low cost to

students not located on campus (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). It was the first attempt to identify, categorize, and systemize distance learning practices, and the project offered direction on how to develop and use multimedia instructional packages for the benefit of the student (Casey, 2008). The courses were offered through combination short sessions, off-campus seminars, and independent study, amplified by telelectures, radio-television, programed material, and mobile laboratories and libraries (Wedemeyer & Najem, 1969). The program was created by incorporating the use of instructional designers and technology experts (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012), and it inspired multimedia teaching techniques (Wedemeyer & Najem, 1969).

The AIM experiment also influenced Britain to create the British Open University, which was a system to provide an open opportunity for adults to access a postsecondary education with no pre-requisites for admission at a low cost (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Today, this open university provides 21% of all higher education in England and is considered a model of distance learning in higher education (Casey, 2008). The British Open University has also been a blueprint for other countries to pursue national open university systems for distance learning (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012), including Belgium, France, Greece, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Portugal (Casey, 2008). The United States is one of the few countries not to have a national open university system due to individual state politics. Nevertheless, the concepts of AIM influenced innovation for higher education, introducing a multimedia framework that is seen in distance education spaces.

Fourth Generation: Teleconferencing

Despite the rapid advancement of new educational technologies, most of the distance education offerings throughout the world at the end of the 1980s was still primarily print-based

(Sumner, 2010). However, while the British Open University created "an explosion of interest in distance education" globally (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 37), satellite technology caused a similar interest in the United States. The world's first educational satellite was launched in 1974, igniting the capability for audio and video teleconferencing in the 1980s. This allowed interactions to occur in real time from different locations. Consortiums were a main component of the success of satellite technology, and they began to share the costs and work associated with designing, delivering, and teaching educational courses. Due to shared efforts of independent institutions within consortiums, this resulted in a new form of "market-driven distance education" (Lessonde, 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). By 1982, the National University Teleconferencing Network used satellites to transmit programs to its 40 institutional members. In 1985, the National Technological University (NTU) offered online degree courses in both continuing and graduate education using satellite transmission to access course materials from other universities (Casey, 2008). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, satellite technologies expanded into business television, where training for corporations and continuing education was accomplished through large distance education organizations outside of higher education. With the development of fiber optic cables, two-way video conferencing became more available and less costly to use for business, K-12, and higher education (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Fifth Generation: Internet-Based Education

While the mainframe computer was developed in the 1930s, the demand for these computers grew during the 1960s and 1970s (Tozzi, 2021) with the rise of the internet. Computers were primarily used in business, science, and engineering until the 1980s (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015), but university systems started to use the internet shortly thereafter (Lessonde, 2014). With the inception of the World Wide Web in 1993, computer networking and

the possibilities for distance education evolved further, and universities began offering web-based programs (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Jones International University, the first completely internet-based higher education institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, opened in 1993 (Gershon, 2020).

The mechanism for academic online instruction came in the form of online course management systems, such as Blackboard and WebCT. These software programs were used to facilitate virtual instructional communication between instructor and student. In February 2005, WebCT and Blackboard merged under the Blackboard brand to become the "leading provider of enterprise software applications and related services to the education industry" (Casey, 2008). Software applications, technological devices, and instructional methods have since expanded (e.g., CD-ROMs, USB drives, webcam, video blogs, podcasting, MOOCs, Learning Management Systems, etc.), and advancements in technology continue through the modern era of distance education, dramatically increasing online course and degree program offerings.

Distance Education Today

The history of distance education unveils a journey from the vocational training of blue-collar workers to academic advanced degree programs for professionals. Distance education has developed its legitimacy as an instructional delivery method in part because of its rich history, increasingly sophisticated technological infrastructure, accrediting bodies, and acceptance by Ivy League universities as a viable and profitable instructional mode (Casey, 2008). According to Allen and Seaman (2017), enrollments in distance education have consistently increased over the past 15 years, regardless of the economy's position, even prior the COVID-19 pandemic that caused most institutions to provide emergency virtual and remote learning opportunities. "The growth of distance enrollment has been relentless," according to Julia E. Seaman (2016, para. 2),

research director of the Babson Survey Research Group. Online student enrollment increased from about 5.5 million out of 20.8 million total students in 2013 to about 14 million out of 19.4 million in 2020 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). Almost three-quarters of college students in the United States were enrolled in an education program offered at least partially online in 2020 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022).

Based on a 2018 study conducted by Seaman et al. analyzing distance education trends in the United States from 2012 to 2016, overall higher education enrollments had been declining since 2012. They found that despite these overall institutional enrollment declines, enrollment in distance education had consistently grown (Seaman et al., 2018). Researchers have similarly suggested that distance education can be used as a tool to meet demands for enrollment growth because it can reach a larger audience (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2021).

In fall 2016, there were 6,359,121 students taking at least one distance education course, comprising 31.6% of all higher education enrollments at the time. This share represented the total number of students taking all their courses at a distance, as well as those who were taking a combination of distance and non-distance courses (Seaman et al., 2018). Seaman et al. (2018) also found a steady increase in both undergraduate and graduate distance enrollments. Furthermore, according to their 2016 data, they found that public institutions enrolled two-thirds of all distance learners; majority of distance learners (56.1%) resided in the same state as the institution; distance learners were almost exclusively domestic (0.7% were international); distance enrollments were concentrated in relatively few institutions (10 institutions accounted for 10% of all distance education enrollments, representing only 0.21% of higher education institutions); undergraduates were five times as likely as graduate students to take at least one

distance education course; and among all students taking distance education courses, approximately one-half (47.2%) were exclusively taking distance education courses.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic began, institutions were forced to offer curriculum virtually and remotely. While virtual and remote coursework differs from wholly online education, this shift has put a global and national spotlight on online education. New data from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics and the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) suggests an initial picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped postsecondary enrollment patterns during fall 2020. Roughly 2,200 institutions that participate in NC-SARA reported a 93% increase in exclusively online enrollment, from 3,016,944 in 2019 to 5,825,723 in 2020. Furthermore, majority of NC-SARA institutions indicated they expect to continue offering distance education options post-pandemic (Lederman, 2021).

Regardless of the pandemic, distance education has been thriving among homeschoolers, K-12 schools, and colleges and universities, many of which require synchronous or asynchronous interaction with an instructor. However, Saba (2011) cautioned that “lack of organizational restructuring in educational institutions prevents them from benefiting from their investment in information technology” (p. 14). Furthermore, Courtney and Wilhoite-Mathews claim that as the progression of distance education continues to evolve, “all aspects of distance education (instructional design, teaching, pedagogy, etc.) become integral to furthering the field” (2015, p. 263). They state that a zealous interest in the possibilities of online learning will shape the next generation of distance education (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015).

With such rapid growth in distance enrollments, there are increasing possibilities for online learning, including organizational restructuring and the expansion of enrollment. While

most U.S. institutions have adopted technologies to assist in distance education, such as a learning management system (LMS), too few decisions revolve around innovative course delivery and design (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2021). While some institutions and degree programs have attempted developing and delivering online programs internally, many institutions do not have the expertise or resources to develop and maintain online programs (Murray, 2019). Consequently, many institutions have partnered with online program management (OPM) providers. Therefore, the OPM industry has dramatically grown over the past decade (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018; Pelletier, 2018).

Online Program Management Providers (OPM)

OPMs are for-profit organizations that help higher education institutions develop and maintain online programs using either a tuition revenue-sharing model or a fee-for-services financial model (Hill, 2018; Hill, 2021; Kim, 2018). These companies provide an array of services including but not limited to marketing, recruitment, enrollment management, curriculum development, online course design, student retention support, creation of online orientations, and technology infrastructure (Hill, 2018). Historically, traditional campus-based institutions have not had the experience or organizational capability to fully support online programs, especially fully online programs that most often serve nontraditional students (Hill, 2018). OPM providers most often support graduate level programs, which typically engage a nontraditional student population (Hill, 2018).

OPM Landscape Today

The OPM industry has dramatically grown over the past decade (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018; Pelletier, 2018). Online education analysts suggest that the number of online programs grew 110% and the number of schools working with OPM providers grew by more than 130%

between 2011 and 2015 (Lurie, 2017). While the exact number of OPM arrangements is unknown due to lack of comprehensive data, more than 550 institutions worked with an OPM to support at least 2,900 education programs (e.g., certificate and degree programs) as of July 2021 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). About 90% of these institutions are public or nonprofit (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). Eduventures, a leader in higher education research, projected that the OPM market would grow to $2.5 billion by 2020 (ICEF, 2015; Pelletier, 2018), yet the market exceeded expectations to $3.5 billion in 2019. A global report conducted in 2019 by HolonIQ, a global education market intelligence platform, predicted the OPM market will reach $7.8 billion by 2025. The report was based on a study of a dataset of more than 4,900 online programs at over 300 universities globally.

OPM providers vary regarding customer bases and services offered. Some providers have large customer bases, while others work with a smaller customer base. Many provide all services related to developing, launching, and maintaining a program, while others primarily focus on a niche area such as instructional design, MOOCs[2], or serving as a LMS provider (Hill, 2021). OPMs also range from supporting various degrees, including certificates, associates, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees (Hill, 2018). As the OPM industry has grown over the years, an adjacent market has emerged focused on workforce education (e.g., professional development and skills training non-credit courses and programs). Some providers in this adjacent market partner with higher education institutions, while others have not; regardless, there is overlap

[2] MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are usually free, open to all, massive in scale, do not carry credit, and do not assign students advisors or tutor groups. The term MOOC was first used by Dave Cormier and Bryan Alexander to describe a course offered by the University of Manitoba in 2008 (Smith & Eng, 2013).

because these providers are creating student demand for specific university-based online programs (Hill, 2021).

There are various financial business models that OPMs utilize. The traditional, tuition revenue-sharing model specifies that the OPM pay for most or all the variable costs upfront for launching and maintaining a new online program. In exchange, the OPM receives half to two-thirds of the tuition revenue (Hill, 2018; Maloney & Kim, 2021). With this full-service, tuition revenue-sharing model, it often takes three to five years for the OPM provider to earn a profit on any online program, so they often require 10-year or longer contracts (Hill, 2018).

However, the industry is evolving with many OPMs changing to fee-for-services models, seemingly offering more flexible partnership arrangements (Hill, 2018; Kim, 2018). With this business model, OPM providers offer the same services for the market price of those services. The program or institution only pays for the services used. While the program or institution has an upfront financial risk and more responsibility in the implementation and maintenance of the program with this model, the strict long-term contracts sharing two-thirds of tuition revenue are avoided (Hill, 2018).

University Risk with OPMs

Regardless the growth of OPM arrangements, there are considerable potential risks involved with institutional partnership with OPMs. Some government officials have questioned the quality and legality of OPM business practices, particularly in tuition revenue-sharing arrangements, regarding financial business models and transparency of arrangements as they relate to the Higher Education Act's incentive compensation ban, which was designed to prevent abusive recruiting practices (McKenzie, 2020). The United States Government Accountability Office released a report to Congressional requestors that examined institutional use of OPMs and

the extent to which the Department of Education's monitoring instructions ensured that it obtains the information needed to assess whether OPM arrangements comply with the incentive compensation ban (2022). The United States Government Accountability Office concluded a need for stronger monitoring of OPM arrangements as there were no data to infer compliance or lack thereof (2022).

Relatedly, quality of postsecondary education and institutional accountability remain a forefront concept amongst stakeholders and policymakers. Quality and return on investment are critical to stakeholders in higher education, and institutional leaders must be accountable for resources used and results achieved (Hillman, 2006; Powell et al., 2012; Shelton, 2011). Institutional leaders are challenged and encouraged to be innovative, efficient, and effective in achieving desired student outcomes. While partnering with an OPM may increase innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness, these arrangements may be a very expensive investment. Whether an OPM utilizes a tuition revenue-sharing or fee-for-service business model, investments in partnerships are complex, and partnerships are a collaboration between OPM and institutional agents (Maloney & Kim, 2021). In addition to the cost of OPM services, there are fixed and overhead costs. Institutions have internal costs to run and manage a certificate or degree program, including faculty and personnel to oversee program initiatives. Assuming the OPM-supported programs are successful, revenue may cover costs and grow internal capacity, but there is a risk programs will not succeed (Maloney & Kim, 2021).

For-Profit Higher Education

Much of the criticism given toward OPMs resembles that given toward the for-profit higher education industry (Burke, 2019). OPMs have been referred to as "wolves in sheep's clothing: predatory for-profit actors masquerading as some of the nation's most trustworthy

public universities" (Hall & Dudley, 2019). Because of parallel criticisms, a brief context on the for-profit higher education industry is provided in this section.

Before 1998, the federal government limited the amount of distance education that could be delivered in academic programs at Title IV institutions. The U.S. Department of Education, through the Higher Education Act, began granting regulation waivers to institutions in hopes of stimulating the growth of online education (Deming et al., 2012). Many for-profits were early adopters in offering programs via distance learning as the internet became more widely used. Online programs were easily replicable, which allowed the for-profit institutions to develop educational and business models that scaled rapidly (Graham, 2021). The most significant disruptive influence in this educational space was the University of Phoenix (Breneman et al., 2006).

One viewpoint stated in literature alleged for-profit practices are rooted in a heavy focus on education for adults and working professionals, course design conducted by a team of individuals with both instructional design and subject matter expertise, an outcomes-based curriculum, and small class sizes (Sperling & Tucker, 1997). Brenneman et al. (2006) argued that private education could learn from for-profit institutions' focus on adult training, providing customer service, learning outcomes, and being student centered.

However, another viewpoint in literature criticized for-profit practices. During the height of the modern for-profit era, scrutinized practices included recruiting students who had little chance of success, high dropout rates, high debt from student loans, and little chance of quality employment post-degree (Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment, 2019). McGuire (2012) highlighted easy access to financial aid as a critical reason for both the

growth of for-profit institutions and the unethical activities that became a common criticism of for-profits.

McMillam Cottom (2017) argued that the focus should instead be on the systemic educational inequity in the United States. She argued that individuals enrolling at for-profits are not victims who have been taken advantage of; instead, they are individuals thoughtfully pursuing new credentials that might provide them with economic and social safety. McMillan Cottom noted that the rise of for-profits resulted from inequities in access to advancement, opportunity, and ideal employment. While McMillan Cottom did not endorse for-profit higher education institutions, she identified that given the systemic inequities, the for-profits may represent the best opportunity to keep these individuals from being left further behind (Graham, 2021).

Outsourcing

Regardless of existing critiques related to the for-profit nature of OPMs, higher education institutions are increasingly turning to outsourced relationships to solve a variety of problems related to institutional accountability (Graham, 2021). Outsourcing, or utilizing an external resource to augment institutional performance (Graham, 2021), may increase efficiency, reducing costs, enhancing service offerings, and supplementing expertise that is not located within the institution (Bartem & Manning, 2001; Glickman et al., 2007; Lambert, 2014; Schibik & Harrington, 2004; Yoon & Im, 2001). Nonetheless, as institutions do not necessarily view themselves as businesses, administrators in higher educational leadership are concerned about loss of control in such relationships, as well as potential misalignment with institutional mission or reputation (Blumenstyk, 2019).

Existing Empirical Research on OPMs

While there is minimal academic literature about OPMs, two empirical studies were found. Firstly, Ramani (2020) conducted a qualitative, interpretive case study focusing on whether the partnership between an institution and their OPM altered faculty approaches to teaching design during the instructional design process. While he identified 13 emergent themes, the study was overall inconclusive due to limitations of faculty differences.

Secondly, Graham (2021) conducted a quantitative study to offer general conclusions about satisfaction between higher education institutions and OPM partners. He investigated whether there was a correlation between the perceived knowledge of marketing and enrollment, available institutional resources for marketing and enrollment, and professional position of those surveyed within the institution. He found the data related to position within the institution, marketing resources, and individuals' perceptions of their ability to market and enroll students displayed weak correlations with satisfaction. Additionally, he found fee-for-service models produced a slightly greater satisfaction than those contracted with a tuition revenue-sharing model. Importantly, Graham theorized that satisfaction was correlated to whether expectations were met or not.

While both studies are groundbreaking and foundational in the sense of being the first to academically and empirically research OPMs, neither touch on the overall value proposition of a partnership of this nature. While Graham (2021) explored satisfaction, a topic related to perceived value, the focus was primarily on marketing and enrollment services. Further, the study was conducted with an institution-as-a-customer lens as opposed to a partnership lens. Consequently, there is no existing research unveiling the multiple dimensions of value and how it can be co-created between institution and OPM.

Theoretical Framework

Philosophical Worldview

I approached this study using a pragmatic interpretive framework, focusing on outcomes of research (Creswell, 2013). Using this worldview, multiple methods and sources of data collection were sought to best answer the research question, and practical implications of research were emphasized (Creswell, 2013). Pragmatism was reflected through multiple philosophical paradigms (i.e., ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological) (see Table 2.1).

Higher Education as a Business

This study assumed that institutions of higher education (and their agents) function like a business. While many agents within higher education dispute this notion, this assumption is rooted and supported by neoliberalism, which has become the dominant ideology in the United States since the 1970s (Saunders, 2010). Neoliberalism, as a hegemony, consists of three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, a reimagined role of the state to focus its power on economic rationality and regulation, and the individual as a rational economic actor (Harvey, 2005; Turner, 2008). As neoliberal policies, practices, and ideas developed in the United States, a parallel process of neoliberal development occurred in U.S. public higher education throughout the past five decades (Saunders, 2010).

Neoliberal management resulted in an extreme decrease in funding of social services (Levin, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). To make up for the decreased funding, colleges and universities have prioritized revenue generation and have become increasingly reliant on private sources of funding (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Congruently, there has been a growing importance of economic efficiency, which has extended

Table 2.1

Philosophical Paradigms for OPM Providers and Higher Education: A Revelatory Case Study on Value Co-Creation

Interpretive Framework	Ontological Beliefs	Epistemological Beliefs	Axiological Beliefs	Methodological Beliefs
Pragmatism	Reality is what is useful, practical, and "works."	Reality is known through using many tools of research that reflect both deductive (objective) and inductive (subjective) evidence.	Values are discussed because of the way that knowledge reflects both the researchers' and the participants' views.	The research process involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis.
How Pragmatism is Reflected in Study	Higher education functions as a business; Focus on value proposition of OPM/department partnership	Use of theoretical (deductive/objective) and conceptual (inductive/subjective) frameworks	Researcher's positionality allows up-close data access and knowledge; As a pragmatist researcher, I believe that research occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts (Creswell, 2013)	Case study involving data collection and analyses of archival records (quantitative/qualitative) and documents and observations (qualitative)

Note. Definitions from "Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches" by J.W. Creswell, 2013.

into institutional decision-making (Ayers, 2004; Currie, 1998; Eckel, 2000; Gumport, 1993). In general, a college education has increasingly been viewed as a private good to be purchased by a student who was redefined as a customer (Chaffee, 1998; Swagler, 1978; Wellen, 2005).

Interorganizational Theories

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks assisted in laying a foundation for understanding partnerships such as that between an academic department and its OPM. Cooperative interorganizational relationships are critical to business practice worldwide; therefore, these relationships are used for a variety of purposes, including product supply, research, new product development, market entry, and production (Jap & Anderson, 2007). As a result, interorganizational theories are well cited in empirical business research. Empirical literature on organizational behavior, business to business relationships, marketing, and management strategy were sought out to build a framework for this study.

Exchange theory (Benson, 1975) states that resource exchange is the main factor that explains organizational relations and behavior. Under this theory, the primary incentive for all organizations is survival, and because organizations usually exist in an environment of limited resources, they are dependent in varying degrees on other organizations for critical resources to function (Alexander, 1995). Likewise, *contingency theory* (Galbraith, 1973) discusses organizational survival. Under contingency theory, the survival and success of organizations depends on how well they adapt to their environments to gain *competitive advantage*, defined as "the above industry average manifested exploitation of market opportunities, neutralization of competitive threats and reduction of costs" (Sigalas et al., 2013, p. 324).

Similarly, *resource-advantage theory* is a process theory of competition, integrating a resource-based view, competence-based view, and relational view in conjunction with the

perspective of competitive advantage. Drawing from the resource-based view, this theory defines resources as tangible and intangible entities that have the capacity to enable competitive advantage. Such resources include financial, physical, legal, human, organization, informational and relational elements (Vivek et al., 2021).

Congruently, the *resource dependence theory* (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) is "one of the most influential theories in organizational theory and strategic management" (Drees & Heugens, 2013, p. 1667). The cornerstone of this theory is that all organizations critically depend on other organizations for the provision of vital resources, and the dependence is often reciprocal between organizations. Because of these interdependencies, formally interdependent organizations engage in various interorganizational arrangements, such as alliances, joint ventures, outsourcing, and mergers and acquisitions (Drees & Heugens, 2013).

Because of the distinctive empirical use of resource dependence theory since 1978, I expected a similar interorganizational relationship between an OPM and an academic department. Furthermore, in conjunction with exchange theory, contingency theory, and resource-advantage theory, the parallel themes that emerge from these theories are that of resources, survival, and competitive advantage. While these theories, rooted in business and management disciplines, suggest the potential reason and nature of an institutional partnership with an OPM provider, the root of the value proposition and *how* the partnership operates is not as clear.

In this study, I aimed to explore deeper into understanding *how* the partnership operates to bring value to each entity of the partnership, assuming it indeed brings value. I aimed to unpack the potential process of value co-creation to unveil a broader scope of *how* an OPM and

academic department collaborate. Therefore, the conceptual framework that will guide this study is and of itself referred to as value co-creation.

Value Co-Creation

Value co-creation (VCC) is a process in which partner organizations integrate resources to facilitate a range of activities, products, and experiences that encourage exchange and interaction, which can lead to better practice and innovation (Prahalad & Ramasway, 2004). It has gained the attention of academics and practitioners as an overarching concept describing collaboration between multiple stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). The earliest observed study referencing the concept of VCC is from the 1980s, but Vargo and Lusch's (2004) influential study on a co-creative service-dominant logic (SDL) of marketing sparked a renewed research interest in VCC across disciplines in recent years.

Because the theoretical roots of VCC are ambiguous with as many as 27 different definitions (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2012) and studies referencing the concept pre-dating the year 2000, Ranjan and Read (2016) conducted a rigorous literature review of 149 papers to identify the two main theoretical dimensions of VCC and three conceptual elements underlying each dimension, which are described in the following sections.

Theoretical Dimensions and Underlying Elements of VCC

The following sections will provide an overview of the two theoretical dimensions of value co-creation (i.e., co-production and value-in-use). Each section will also break down each dimension into three underlying conceptual elements. Together, the dimensions and conceptual elements create the foundational model of VCC used as a framework for this study (Figure 2.1). For clarity, consumers will refer to the higher education partner (e.g., academic department) and partner organization will refer to a partnered provider (e.g., OPM). While benefits of VCC are

noted as reciprocal, like resource dependence theory (Drees & Heugens, 2013), reviewing the concept under one mindset will assist in understanding the model more clearly.

Co-production. Co-production is a process in which consumers integrate their resources (e.g., knowledge, experiences, opinions) very early in the phase of creation and production of a service or product (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). For an activity to be considered as co-production, there needs to be a fundamental shift in the production process with consumers engaged throughout design, knowledge production, and feedback that can impact value proposition (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). Continuous dialogue fuels and facilitates collaboration (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). There is a more equal sense of responsibility than in traditional producer-consumer exchanges because consumers integrate their knowledge and experiences and interact as part of the team with the partner organization (Mark, 2013).

***Knowledge*.** Sharing knowledge between consumers and the partner organization is a fundamental and critical element of co-production. It helps identify current and future needs, and organizations that participate in this practice are more likely to predict future market opportunities, improve established processes and create more value for the organization, consumers, the consumer's customers, and any shareholders (Gibbert et al., 2002).

***Equity*.** Equity refers to equal access to knowledge and resources (e.g., software platforms, data, personnel) between consumers and partner organizations. A partner organization's ability to provide equity to their consumers is often rooted in (1) a sense of maintaining control (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and (2) their ability to provide access (Payne et al., 2008). Regardless of barriers, this element is important for co-production and VCC. Without accessibility, VCC cannot observe deep and ongoing dialogue, interaction, or

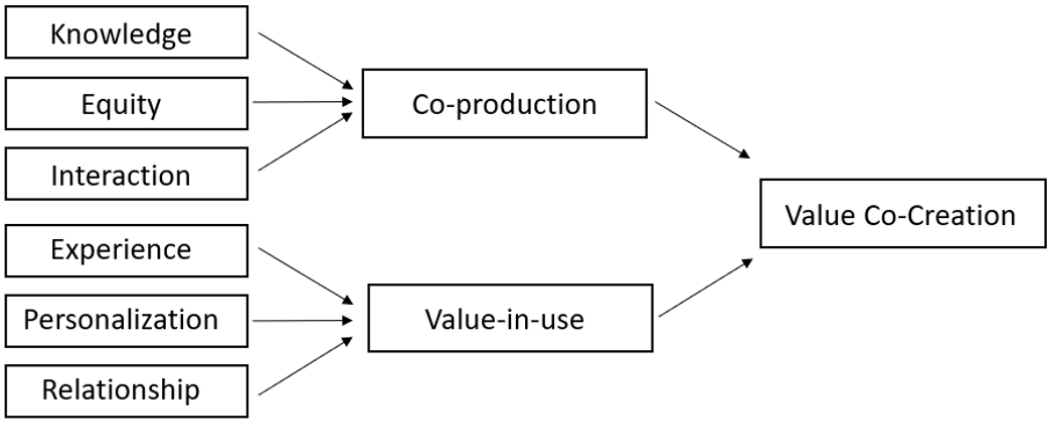


Figure 2.1. Foundational Value Co-Creation Conceptual Model
Adapted from "Value co-creation: Concept and measurement" by K.R. Ranjan & S. Read, 2016.

shared responsibility (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Co-production and VCC need transparency to balance roles between consumers and partner organizations (Vargo et al., 2008).

Interaction. Interactions between consumers and partner organizations are critical to facilitating all aspects of co-production and VCC (Payne et al., 2008). Continuous dialogue and interactions should mimic the notion of an alliance relationship (Vargo et al., 2008). Consumers should be able to produce feedback at any time, on all elements related to co-production or the partnership (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

It is important to note that while consumers integrate their resources into co-production, it is still predominately controlled by the partner organization. The organization can control how, when, and to what extent consumers co-produce. Therefore, co-production is only one dimension of the VCC model. The second dimension, value-in-use, is described in the following section.

Value-in-use. While co-production is the process that occurs during design and delivery of the value proposition, value-in-use (ViU) is what happens to the value for both consumers and partner organizations once they start using the co-produced service or product. First introduced by Vargo and Lusch (2004), ViU notes that whatever is co-produced does not actually hold any value until the consumer imposes value upon it. The concept argues that partner organizations do not solely provide value, but rather they and consumers both play active roles in the process to create value together (Diaz-Mendes & Gummesson, 2012). For example, if an OPM and academic department co-produced a degree program, the program would have no value until the college admitted students with the goal of retaining and graduating them. ViU is related to how consumers and partner organizations use the value propositions provided them through their time and experiences (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Experience. The first element of ViU is the consumer's experience and their perceived value of it (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). If the experience is positive, the consumer is more likely to develop a positive relationship with the service or product, as well as with the partner organization (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003). This will later impact the consumer's behavior with the service/product (Payne et al., 2008), and whether they continue the business relationship with the partner organization or promote their services to others (von Hippel & Katz, 2002).

Personalization. The component of personalization refers to how consumers can further personalize the value proposition to their own usage (Ranjan & Read, 2016). At this stage, personalization allows consumers to additionally modify meaning, value, and usage of the service or product (Cova et al., 2011).

Relationship. Another element of ViU is relationships. This element complements experience and personalization in a more complex layer. The consumers' overall relationship with the partner organization, separate from individual experiences, can impact the consumers' overall perceived value of the service, product, or partnership (Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). This element ties together all other elements of VCC as it highlights the collaborative experience throughout.

Adaptation of VCC Conceptual Model for This Study

Due to the potential financial risks posed for universities, we cannot ignore the financial elements associated with a value proposition. Additionally, through a neoliberal lens, institutions have prioritized revenue generation (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and economic efficiency (Ayers, 2004; Currie, 1998; Eckel, 2000; Gumport, 1993). Therefore, in addition to the dimensional elements of the existing VCC conceptual model, a financial element will be added to the model for this study (Figure 2.2). Visually, financial value

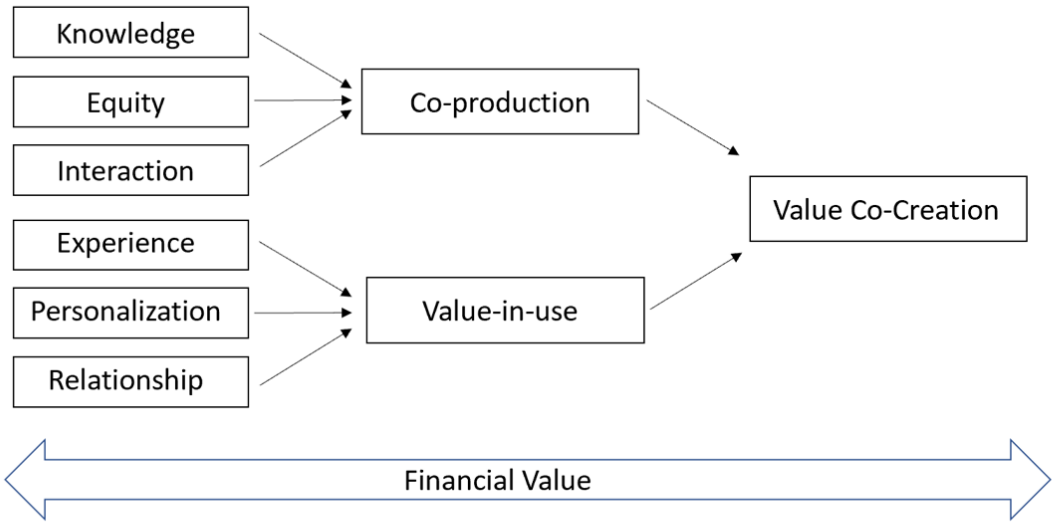


Figure 2.2. Adapted Value Co-Creation Model: VCC Conceptual Model for Dissertation. Adapted from "Value co-creation: Concept and measurement" by K.R. Ranjan & S. Read, 2016.

is displayed as an arrow going both directions, signifying those finances play a role in value proposition throughout the entire value co-creation process. This adaptation of the conceptual model will assist in the discussion about whether the partnership translates co-creation into value, not just for the consumer (i.e., academic department), but also for the consumer's primary customers (i.e., students). For convenience and simplicity, this adapted model will simply be referred to as the VCC model.

VCC in Higher Education

While VCC is heavily referenced and used in marketing (Frow et al., 2014; Ranjan & Read, 2016), business-to-business (Hein et al., 2019; Sarker et al., 2012), and other business realms (Jap & Anderson, 2007; Pera et al., 2021; Ranjan & Read, 2016), it is not often referenced in higher education research. However, Dollinger et al. (2018) discussed the relevance of this conceptual framework for higher education and translated potential benefits for all involved that could come from co-creation between institutions and their "consumers" (i.e., students). They translated the traditional VCC conceptual framework into one specifically for higher education between institution and students.

Additionally, Leem (2021) conducted the only other study found using VCC in a higher education context. Specifically, he investigated the effect of value co-creation on student benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea. He found that VCC had a positive effect on student benefits.

Dollinger et al. (2018) and Leem (2021) indicated that VCC is a valuable conceptual model for higher education purposes. However, it has not thoroughly been studied in higher educational research. Through this dissertation, I add to existing literature by not only looking at VCC through a higher education lens, but also through an OPM partnership lens in attempt to

advance research on this topic and potential innovation in distance education. VCC, as an adapted conceptual model informed by other interorganizational theories and neoliberalism, will help guide this study's research question, data analyses, and discussion.

Chapter Summary

I examined literature on distance education and interorganizational partnerships in this chapter to enhance the scope of understanding for this study. I provided an overview of OPMs, including the current landscape of the industry, and existing but incomplete literature about higher education institutions partnering with OPMs. Further, I described the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks as a lens to guide the overall study design, research question, data analyses of findings, and overall discussion. This literature review supports the purpose of this study, as well as guides the chosen methodology, further described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction to Chapter

The purpose of this study was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of OPMs partnering with entities of higher education. I accomplished this objective through an in-depth, revelatory case study of value co-creation as experienced in the partnership between a doctoral research institution, specifically an academic department, and its OPM. Because the OPM industry is growing, this study suggests that OPMs engage a value proposition of helping institutional partners achieve results and accountability (i.e., they create perceived, conditional value). However, because academic programs are still institutional initiatives, they are never fully outsourced and require collaboration (Maloney & Kim, 2021). Therefore, the following research question will guide this study: *How does an OPM co-create value with an institutional partner?*

This chapter provides an overview of the steps taken to accomplish this study's purpose in pursuit of answering the research question. I describe the methodology used, including an overview of the case context, an overview of data sources, and an in-depth description outlining the data collection and analyses processes. Furthermore, researcher positionality and ethical considerations are stated. Finally, limitations of the case study as a methodology are addressed.

Methodology

This dissertation is a revelatory case study in which a phenomenon previously inaccessible to social science inquiry is observed and analyzed (Yin, 2018). Yin defined a case study as "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). Case study was an ideal method for this

dissertation because a *how* research question is being addressed about a unique phenomenon, as described in Yin's definition.

With case studies, researchers explore one or more contemporary bounded systems through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of evidence (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). This study is a within-site study, meaning a single case was studied (Creswell, 2013). It is also an intrinsic case study because it "has unusual interest in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed" (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). The case for this study is the partnership between an academic department at a doctoral research institution and its OPM, specifically from Spring 2019 to Spring 2022.

Case Context

According to Miles et al. (2014), a case is "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 28). The bounded system indicates there are boundaries, or specific, definitive criteria identifying the case, such as time and place. The case for this study is the partnership between an academic department at a doctoral research institution and its OPM, specifically from Spring 2019 to Spring 2022. This specific case was chosen purposefully because data for the case was highly accessible (Creswell, 2013), which assisted in the creation of an information-rich case in which one can learn a large amount about issues of central importance to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, the timeframe captures the length of time that the specific partnership being analyzed had existed at the time of the study's inception. As Yin (2018) suggested, the case should be derived from the research question; because the research question asks about the partnership, the entirety of time in which the partnership had existed was included.

Data Sources

I conducted a holistic analysis of the case. The analysis is rich in the context of the case (Creswell, 2013) as I detailed the structure of the academic department and its OPM-supported programs, a description of the OPM, and a description of services included in the OPM partnership. I analyzed multiple sources of data to investigate the research question:

1. *Archival record analysis*: I reviewed student survey data from Fall 2019 to Spring 2022, including data from first-term surveys, graduation exit surveys, and alumni surveys. Fall 2019 was chosen because it was the first term within the partnership that an OPM-supported program launched and admitted students. The surveys were both quantitative and qualitative in design, including Likert scale data and open-ended responses to questions.
2. *Document analysis:* I reviewed the academic department website and the OPM website.
3. *Participant-Observations*: I observed partnership meetings as a participant-observer and reviewed fieldnotes from these meetings.

The data sources for this study were purposefully chosen to promote data triangulation by utilizing multiple frames of reference regarding value and value proposition, as discussed in the VCC model. Specifically, data sources were chosen intentionally to obtain perspectives from the OPM (i.e., partner organization), the academic department (i.e., the consumer), and students in the OPM-supported programs within the academic department (i.e., the consumer's customers). See Table 3.1 to understand which perspectives were sought by pursuing each data source.

Table 3.1

Data Source Perspective Objectives

Data Source	OPM (Organization)	Academic Department (Consumer)	Students (Consumer's Customer)
Archival Records			x
Documents	x	x	x
Observations	x	x	

The academic department provided me access to the survey data, and the documents (i.e., websites) for analysis are publicly available to access. For observations, I was a participant-observer in meetings between the academic department and OPM and used my fieldnotes as part of this study. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data was collected.

Data Collection

I created a case study database to store and organize the multiple sources of data. I utilized a case study protocol with the database to promote reliability of the study. According to Yin (2018), the database's main function is to preserve collected data in an easily retrievable form. This process includes compiling and organizing all notes, documents, tabular materials, and narratives (Yin). The database also included my research and reflexivity journal (see Positionality and Ethical Considerations and Enhancement of Study Quality sections of this chapter for more information).

Archival Record Analysis

Archival records, often taking the form of data files and records (e.g., survey data, organizational records), can be a strong data source for case study research (Yin, 2018). Students in the case academic department, specifically in programs supported by the OPM provider, are surveyed during their first term in their programs (beginning of term survey and end of term survey), upon graduation week (graduation exit survey), and six months post-graduation (alumni survey). All surveys aim to understand student satisfaction, experiences with various elements of the programs, and how likely students are to recommend their academic program to another person in the form of a Net Promoter Score (NPS). Additionally, the post-graduation alumni survey aims to capture career data. Student support coaches promoted the surveys over email. There was no incentive for taking the survey, and students opted in to participate. All surveys

were anonymous, and they were co-developed by the academic department/program and the OPM. They were administered each term (i.e., spring, summer, and fall terms) to the corresponding student audience. While they were easily identifiable by term, individual student responses were anonymous. I conducted convergent mixed methodology analyses, which occurs when results of the qualitative and the quantitative data analysis are compared and/or combined to obtain a more complete understanding of results, to validate one set of findings with the other, and/or to determine whether survey participants respond similarly to inquiries presented in different ways (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Further details about convergent analyses are described in the data analysis section of this study.

Document Analysis

Documentation is a useful data source for case studies (Yin, 2018). It is an unobtrusive method of data collection that can be reviewed repeatedly. I analyzed the OPM's website and the academic department's website as documentation to provide context about the partnership and financial model used by the OPM. This documentation supported the overview of the partnership with a rich, thick description of the case, and specific details were found to corroborate evidence from the other data sources (Yin).

Participant-Observations

Observations are another common data source for case studies to convey important case characteristics (Yin, 2018). I specifically employed participant-observation for this study. In this type of observation, I was not a passive observer; instead, I assumed multiple roles within my fieldwork and participated in the actions being studied as a researcher and a program manager (see Positionality and Ethical Considerations section for more information about my professional role) (Yin). I was a participant-observer in meetings between the OPM and the academic

department. Specifically, I observed meetings dedicated to the creation, planning, and implementation of a new academic program preparing to launch in 2023 with the support of the OPM provider. I took rigorous observation fieldnotes, and afterward, I compiled all data and coded my fieldnotes for themes as indicated in the data analysis section of this study.

Data Analysis

I stored and organized data in a case study database, which allowed me to stay organized and immerse myself in the various sources of data. It also allowed me to analyze data across sources. Specific details regarding data analysis for each data source are outlined in the following sections.

Archival Record Analysis

Student surveys were both quantitative and qualitative in design, gathering both Likert scale data and open-ended responses to questions. In total, 21 student surveys were analyzed (16 first term surveys, four graduate exit surveys, and one alumni survey). Each survey had 25-85% response rates. I compiled quantitative data to compare NPS scores across terms. Further, I conducted convergent mixed methodology analyses, which occurs when results of the qualitative and the quantitative data analyses are compared and/or combined to obtain a more complete understanding of results, to validate one set of findings with the other, and/or to determine whether survey participants respond similarly to inquiries presented in different ways (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative data pertaining to students' impressions of the program were compiled, and I coded them for emergent themes using emergent coding, also known as open or *in vivo* coding. This process involved searching for common words or phrases, also called "recurring regularities" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), that emerged from data. The emergent themes further assisted the analysis of value as perceived by the students. Simultaneously, I

analyzed Likert scale data pertaining to initial program impressions and overall experience in the program, and I compared and analyzed results against the emergent themes.

Document Analysis

Using the educator resources steps outlined by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (2017) for primary source document analysis, I created guidelines that I followed for document analysis of the academic department website and the OPM website (see Appendix A). Additionally, the websites were reviewed for evidence pertaining to the dimensional themes and subthemes of the VCC model. The documents' analyses provided additional context about the partnership and added to the rich, thick description of the case.

Participant-Observations

Data analysis was ongoing as multiple observations were conducted over time. I observed a total of four meetings (two discovery meetings, one creative concepts meeting, and one student support and engagement meeting). Rigorous fieldnotes were taken at each meeting. Per Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) recommendation, I took fieldnotes on the physical setting, the participant roles, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors, and my own behavior. I used a semi-structured strategy to take notes more easily since I was both a meeting participant and observer (see Appendix B). This strategy kept me organized and allowed for theoretical coding.

Using the qualitative data from observation fieldnotes, I searched for patterns, concepts, and insights that seemed promising for answering the research question. I relied on the theoretical propositions of this study, particularly the VCC model. Yin (2018) confirmed that this strategy (i.e., relying on theoretical propositions) is effective because the process of analyzation is rooted in literature, and the literature guided the overall objectives and design of the case study. To accomplish this strategy, I used an analytic technique known as pattern matching,

which is one of the most desirable techniques in case study analysis (Yin, 2018). Pattern matching logic compares empirically based patterns (i.e., findings from the case study) with a predicted pattern (i.e., the VCC model). According to Yin, if the empirical and predicted patterns appear similar, the internal validity of findings is enhanced.

To determine empirically based patterns, I conducted *a priori* coding, also known as theoretical coding. This process involves coding data based on the core tenets of a theoretical framework or paradigm, seeking congruence and variance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Data were coded against the dimensional elements of the VCC model as themes and subthemes.

Furthermore, I created a visual array of VCC themes to highlight each dimensional element of the VCC model, including quotations and other data evidence that fit each element and what data sources were analyzed to emerge the evidence (see Appendix C). By creating the array of information, I was able to visually analyze data across all data sources to interrogate the research question.

Enhancement of Study Quality

Validity Strategies

Qualitative validity, also referred to as trustworthiness, is the accuracy of findings from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, and readers of the study (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). Using multiple strategies to establish validity enhances a researcher's ability to assess accuracy (Creswell). Therefore, I triangulated my data sources to strengthen construct validity (Yin). Triangulation is the use of multiple data sources to ensure and confirm emergent findings (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). By using multiple data sources to verify themes or findings that expand across sources, validity was increased (Yin).

Peer review or debriefing is another strategy that provides an external confirmation of the research (Creswell, 2013). My dissertation committee served as peers and experts to review and challenge my thought process and research protocol to ensure validity.

Another strategy is clarifying researcher bias from the beginning of the study. By noting my positionality, I can clarify any bias or assumptions that impact inquiry and are likely to shape the interpretation and approach of the study (Creswell, 2013). I address my positionality in the Positionality and Ethical Considerations section later in this chapter.

I also employed member checking. Under this process, I asked participants to view any observation interpretations to ensure accuracy of their words, meanings, and actions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this technique is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314).

Rich, thick description also strengthens external validity (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By describing the case study site and setting in detail, readers can determine if the information and findings can transfer to other settings (i.e., transferability). This process can involve describing general to specific details, interconnecting details using strong actions verbs and quotations (Creswell). I maintained confidentiality of all individuals, the institution and academic department, and the OPM provider; however, I presented as much detail as possible to provide context and understanding to readers.

To further increase construct validity of the information in the case study, I maintained a chain of evidence, as recommended by Yin (2018). To do this, I kept record of all steps taken in the research process to allow a reader to trace steps from findings back to the initial research question or from the question to findings. This is achieved if the research question is evidently linked to findings, increasing the overall quality of the case study (Yin).

Reliability Strategies

Qualitative reliability refers to the researcher's approach to remain consistent throughout the study (Yin, 2018). In essence, the researcher must demonstrate that the operations of the study can be repeated with the same results, with the goal of minimizing errors and biases. In a case study, this involves documenting as many steps to the procedure as possible (Creswell, 2014). Yin recommended creating a detailed case study protocol and database to allow readers to follow the research procedure. These strategies were implemented for this study. According to Yin, the database's main function is to preserve collected data in an easily retrievable form. This process includes compiling and organizing all notes, documents, tabular materials, and narratives (Yin).

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

Since all data will be filtered through me as a human instrument, it is important to openly state my position and connection to the topic and interrogate my personal worldviews as they may impact interpretation of findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). At the inception of this study, I was a program manager for an online program within the academic department partnered with the OPM provider; therefore, I worked within the case site for this study. At the conclusion of this study, I no longer held the program manager role and left in positive relations with the academic department and OPM. While there are no direct conflicts of interest with this research, one may question the authenticity and potential biases that may exist. As a program manager, I served as a liaison between an academic program and the OPM provider. I acknowledge that I may have inherent subconscious biases about the academic college, its programs, and the OPM partnership, as well as a significant interest in this study's results. Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to the importance of "ecological validity," which suggests that to have plausible

researcher interpretations, the researcher must have some knowledge of the subject's definition of the situation (Poch, 2005). My role as a program manager for the academic department allowed me to access specific data sources and understand the case more deeply, which allowed me to provide rich descriptions of the case and findings. Furthermore, my dissertation committee served as a neutral party to ensure ethical results were delivered.

Additionally, while this study is not necessarily critical in nature, the case under investigation (i.e., the academic department and OPM partnership from Spring 2019 to Spring 2022) states a dedication to creating diverse programs designed for students who come from various ages, races, ethnicities, countries, genders, social classes, and sexual orientations. It is important to consider how my positionality, including my race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation, may affect this research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I identify as a white, heterosexual female. I was raised and continue to live in a middle-class lifestyle in the United States. I acknowledge the privilege I have that assisted me in obtaining my professional role and education. My background may influence my interpretations of interactions and definitions of value.

Throughout the study, I engaged in reflexivity, which is the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher (Johnson, 1997). Probst and Berenson (2014) defined reflexivity as "awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher. It is both a state of mind and a set of actions" (p. 814). To check any potential biases and reflect while conducting this research, I kept research and reflexivity journals to capture my thoughts and reflect on the data collection process.

Limitations

Case study research, by nature, involves conducting a deep level of research on one or multiple cases; but specific cases are not "sample units" of a larger population (Yin, 2018). This case study focuses on one case involving one academic department and one OPM; therefore, it does not capture experiences or details of all institutional partnerships with all OPMs. Furthermore, perceived value is subjective in nature. However, by providing rich, descriptive data, as noted in the previous validity strategies section, readers may determine the transferability or application of the findings to other sites or cases. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) promoted the use of extrapolations, which are "modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions" (p. 255). Similarly, Yin (2018) noted that analytic generalizations, as opposed to statistical generalizations, may occur in case study research. Analytic generalizations are generalizations, principles, or lessons learned from a case study that may potentially apply to a variety of situations. Analytical generalizations may be based in either supporting, modifying, rejecting, or otherwise advancing theoretical concepts referenced in the case study design. Extrapolations and analytic generalizations are posed in chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this dissertation was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of OPMs partnering with entities of higher education. I accomplished this objective through an in-depth, revelatory case study of value co-creation as experienced in the partnership between a doctoral research institution, specifically an academic department, and its OPM. This chapter provided an overview of ethical positionality considerations and the steps taken to accomplish this study's purpose in pursuit of answering the research question. I

described the methodology used, including an overview of the case, an overview of data sources, and an in-depth description outlining the data collection and analyses processes. Furthermore, strategies to ensure quality of the study and limitations were discussed in detail.

CHAPTER 4

Introduction to Chapter

After IRB approval, data collection and analyses were completed as outlined in chapter 3. This chapter summarizes results of the analyses. An overview of the partnership between the case online program management provider (OPM) and academic department is provided through rich description of the OPM, the academic department, and the partnership functionality, which is supported by document analysis (i.e., analysis of websites). Findings derived from document analysis and observation fieldnotes evidenced the OPM's and academic department's perceptions of value and how it was co-created. Furthermore, findings derived from archival records analyses (i.e., analyses of student surveys) further evidenced the student perception of value.

Summary of Analyses

Upon triangulation of data gathered from all three data sources, the case site demonstrated alignment with all six of the elements of the VCC model (see Appendix C). In summary, *co-production* was reached through the elements of *knowledge, equity,* and *interaction*. Sharing *knowledge* was the main purpose of the meetings observed, and positive *interactions* were seen through casual and friendly conversations surrounding the meetings. Sharing resources such as data, platforms, and personnel (e.g., enrollment advisors and support coaches) evidenced *equity*. However, one equity shortcoming was that coaches were not issued access to the institution's SIS. However, the academic department maintains constant communication between program manager and coaches, which essentially creates more *interaction* between partners. Regardless, all interactions observed represented an alliance relationship (Vargo et al., 2008) because the academic department was able to produce feedback at any time, on all elements related to *co-production* or the partnership (Prahalad & Ramaswamy,

2004). The document analysis further supported these results as data was found specifically describing the partnership approach.

Furthermore, *value-in-use* was achieved through the elements of *experience*, *personalization*, and *relationship*. The fact that the academic department was continuing to launch additional programs with the OPM partnership evidenced a positive *experience*. Interactions observed at meetings supported this notion. *Personalization* was evidenced through observation fieldnotes from the discovery meetings, in which partners conducted a thorough analysis of the uniqueness of the academic department and its programs. As evidenced in the observations, the academic department was able to produce feedback and modify the program and processes in real time during the partnership to ensure the academic program was personalized to their needs, goals, and messaging. The document analysis further supported these results as data was found specifically describing the partnership approach. The overall *relationship* between the OPM and academic department appeared positive as evidenced through the observed engagement and collaboration. Furthermore, the archival record analysis indicated positive perceptions of value for students experiencing the program. Across eight intake terms, data with NPS scores, survey results, and qualitative emergent themes of positive experiences with *preparation, community, support*, and the *program design*, evidenced perceived value.

Accountability for quality and career outcomes also was achieved. Because the students (i.e., consumer's customers) perceived value in the program, the academic department (i.e., consumer) perceived value in the relationship and overall partnership with the OPM (i.e., partner organization). The following sections include further detail about data analyses and findings. Additional discussion of findings and how they fit into the VCC model is provided in chapter 5.

Partnership Overview

The partnership between the OPM and academic department in this case study has been contracted since January 2019. Since then, partnership members have designed and supported one master's level graduate program; supported six existing executive level graduate programs for various services; and is in the process of designing a new master's level graduate program set to launch in spring 2023. For purposes of anonymity, I will not disclose the OPM name or year of company creation, nor the specific institution, academic college, academic department, or program names. The following information was provided by the academic department, supported by the OPM and academic department websites, and additionally supported by my personal knowledge as a former program manager of an OPM-supported program within the case academic department. Citations of the websites will not be included to maintain anonymity.

OPM Overview

The OPM in this case study describes itself as the most innovative ed tech leader in America. It has been working in the OPM business sector for over a decade. The company has a B Corp Certification, which is a designation that indicates the business is meeting high standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency on factors such as employee benefits, charitable giving to supply chain practices, and input materials. This private certification for for-profit companies is meant to display a measurement of a company's social and environmental impact (B Lab, 2022).

The OPM partners with numerous universities and supports nearly 100 online degree and non-degree programs. The company declares to be better than a "conventional" OPM, promoting a "more flexible" fee-for-services economic model, better collaboration, more transparency, and more alignment with university partner interests and goals. Its website stated that in as little as

six months, their teams can establish the technology infrastructure to recruit and teach a full cohort of students.

The services offered through this OPM include technology support, learning design, marketing and recruitment, and student experience support. For technology support, the OPM describes offering “best-in-class” technology tools that can be integrated with existing university systems, such as learning management systems (LMS), student information systems (SIS), and customer relationship management (CRM) systems. The company holds a ISO 27001 Certification, which is an internationally recognized specification for an Information Security Management System (ISMS). It is the only auditable standard that concerns the overall management of information security (Alliantist, Ltd., 2022). With this certification, the OPM specifies a focus on data security. The OPM’s website detailed the company spends $10 million per year improving its platforms and keeping pace with evolving technology trends.

For learning design, the OPM builds courses in collaboration with faculty. While many of the designers have backgrounds in teaching and instructional design, the OPM and academic department highlighted that the faculty are content experts and own the courses. In addition to assisting in course building and design, the OPM offers faculty development and support resources, like 1:1 coaching sessions, group training and workshops, and on-demand self-paced resources on topics unique to online teaching strategies. The company also offers 24/7 access to technical support services for faculty. The OPM’s website also promoted accessibility with courses aligning with the Universal Design for Learning principles and complying with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

For marketing services, the OPM provides strategic advice and market research based on Department of Labor data and national and regional employment trends. It also services web

design and content management, building and managing a paid media strategy (i.e., paid advertising), search engine optimization (SEO) and inbound marketing, conversion rate optimization (CRO) marketing, and lead nurturing. The overall strategy intends to generate interest from ideal prospective students at the lowest possible cost. Aligned with marketing efforts, the OPM provides a recruitment center by providing enrollment counselors that are trained, coached, and monitored to represent colleges and assist prospective students through admission deadlines and the application process.

For student support and engagement services, the OPM ensures a team of coaches that are available 16 hours a day, seven days a week, for proactive and reactive support. The student support services are in place to maintain retention, and services are measured each term using a rubric built to support a responsive, inclusive, supportive, and engaging program experience. Additionally, the OPM provides a program-specific support desk for technology support that is staffed 24 hours, seven days a week. The OPM also provides a mental health support team to offer 24/7 telehealth services. Further, the OPM assists in running an ambassador program to connect prospective students to currently enrolled students to personalize the student experience.

The OPM is a fee-for-service company. The company's economic model intends to reduce the cost of higher education by using technology. Promotional materials claim the model saves $15,000 to $30,000 per student versus other, conventional OPMs (i.e., those with revenue share models). The OPM markets itself as a less expensive option than creating and maintaining online programs internally. Because the company works with multiple institutions and programs, OPM representatives can negotiate lower costs, better support, and new features in the software to address the needs of online education. While the specific service fees were not provided

during data collection, the following “management costs” to manage individual programs were specified:

- $22,000 per month for the first program built at each school or college within a university
- $12,000 per month for each additional program
- $88 per credit hour enrolled each semester

The remaining technology and services costs vary depending on the unique needs of each university partner.

Academic Department Overview

The case academic department is embedded within a business school at a R1 Doctoral University (very high research activity). The OPM-supported programs in the department vary in academic disciplines but are all nationally ranked graduate level degree and non-degree programs meant for working professionals. There are 22 degree programs offered through the department, excluding the non-degree educational opportunities. Each degree program has a dedicated program manager to ensure efficient processes and program quality, and this individual works as a liaison with the OPM, overseeing all program efforts.

The first OPM-supported program in the academic department launched in fall 2019, establishing the initial partnership with the OPM. For the purposes of this study, archival record data were collected from the initial program. The program was designed for working professionals and global participants. It intakes students three times per academic year (i.e., spring, summer, and fall terms). Students may choose to take one, two, or three courses per term based on their needs and goals. The program consists of 10 courses (i.e., 30 credit hours), and students can graduate as soon as 16 months or extend coursework over five years. The program utilizes a flipped classroom teaching methodology in which the traditional class setting focuses

on application of topics and is utilized to solve problems or think practically through the discussion and peer collaboration of students and instructor. Content is delivered in asynchronous and synchronous formats. Students are expected to attend synchronous live sessions over the Zoom video platform approximately every other week per course. The program also includes one required immersive experience in which students go to campus for two days to interact with faculty, staff, and other students, while engaging with networking activities, career workshops, and campus traditions.

To date, 244 students were enrolled in this program living across 15 states and eight countries. The student demographic profile as of October 2022 showed 33% of students identified as female, 30% identified as ethnically diverse, 12% identified as active military or veteran, 33 was the average age, and 7 was the average years of work experience held. Program enrollment goals each term fluctuate, but an average of 50 enrolled students per intake is desired. Five of the eight intake terms analyzed in this case achieved an enrollment of 50 students, including the two most recent terms of fall 2021 and spring 2022. The other three intake terms did not meet enrollment goals.

Partnership Functionality

The academic department utilized the full suite of services offered by the OPM to design and support the initial program. The following section is provided to assist readers in understanding the scope of the functionality of the partnership. Descriptions of services used, and to what extent they were used, are provided with rich description to promote transferability. Triangulation of data gathered from all three data sources and personal case knowledge evidenced this information. Table 4.1 collates a summary of the information. Each service is further described following the table.

Table 4.1

OPM and Academic Department Partnership Functionality

Functional area	What OPM provides	What academic department provides
Marketing	Market research Development and maintenance of microsite, RFI form, marketing campaigns, and social media and SEO strategies Blog and public relations initiatives	Content and branding for all initiatives Development and maintenance of microsite Approval of all marketing and branding efforts
Recruitment & Admissions	Enrollment advisors to develop and support applicant pipeline Shared webinar facilitation	Creation of program application and admission requirements University and program information; content for shared enrollment manual Oversight and processing of all admissions decisions, including interviewing applicants Liaison with the Graduate Admissions Office
Instructional Design	Instructional designers to blueprint and build courses based on faculty design and content Creation of videos and interactive learning objects Term prep support each term for updating syllabi and course content as prescribed by faculty ePortfolio coaches for faculty and students	Faculty/Subject Matter Experts to design courses and provide all content Resources to compensate faculty who participate in course build and design Schedule and curriculum map Term prep support each term to set sections and live session schedule Internal faculty support Liaison for third party textbook vendors

Table 4.1 Continued

Functional area	What OPM provides	What academic department provides
Instructional Design	Technology coaching (Zoom and LMS onboarding for new faculty as needed) Learning tools interoperability (LTI) Integrations	
Student Support & Engagement	Student support coaches (amount increases as program scales) to provide individual student support, communicate processes/procedures, conduct retention and grade check-ins, provide time management and resource support for students, and conduct onboarding Promote and attend the live session orientation Ambassador program creation guidance 24/7 program-specific Helpdesk for technology support Creation of student virtual orientation and onboarding process guidance Virtual student union (VSU) engagement Development and distribution of student surveys	Content and updates for student virtual orientation and onboarding processes each term Facilitate the live session orientation Ambassador program maintenance Oversight of all processes and their alignment with university policies and procedures Advisor of record All SIS system use and management Advocacy for distance education students campus-wide VSU engagement Career Coordinator Campus-wide mental health services for distance education students Development of student surveys Full planning and implementation of in-person immersive experience (degree requirement) for students

Marketing

The OPM provides the program marketing services including a full marketing team to research trends on institutional competitors within the academic discipline and to project career outcomes in the discipline's industry. The OPM's marketing team launched a program microsite, integrated with the academic department's main website. The site includes request for information (RFI) forms that help gather inquiries from interested individuals to learn more about the program, which develops leads and prospective applicants. Public relations services also are provided in the form of blog creation; blogposts were developed about the industry, faculty achievements, and college achievements to create positive public image and drive leads to the website and RFI forms. Marketing campaigns, including social media and SEO strategies, were also implemented. Content, branding, and maintenance for the website, the blog, and the campaigns were dually supported by the OPM and academic department.

Recruitment and Admissions

The OPM provides the program recruitment services including enrollment advisors, or individuals who engage with prospective leads and applicants. An enrollment manual was co-developed by the OPM and academic department to ensure processes and information were accurately shared. As the program scales, additional enrollment advisors are hired to ensure they can sufficiently support a manageable caseload. Enrollment advisors contact prospective applicants who have completed the website's RFI form, registered for a webinar, or attended university recruitment events. They ensure prospective students complete applications by the deadlines determined by the university and department. Advisors also connect students to their support coach to ensure onboarding and enrollment. While enrollment advisors are student-

facing, the academic department reviews all applications, processes all admission decisions, and maintains oversight of all application portal processes and procedures.

Instructional Design

In 2019, the OPM provided instructional design services by outsourcing to another third-party company. After the first two courses in the program were built, the academic department ended their contract with the outsourced company, and the OPM replaced it with another third-party company. After all the courses of the initial OPM-supported program were designed and built, the academic department directed the OPM to provide these services differently. As a result, the OPM assigned one individual to oversee "term prep" activities (i.e., preparing and updating courses each term) moving forward. The model of one OPM individual overseeing term prep has continued since January 2021. This evolution in how instructional design services were offered serves as a specific example of value co-creation at work. The academic department's feedback was implemented, and services were improved to provide value for both partners.

Student Support and Engagement

The OPM provides student support coaches to ensure student onboarding and overall program retention. While coaches are student-facing, the academic department (i.e., the program manager) ensures all processes are followed and key messages are shared. The academic department serves as the producer of information, and the coaches serve as a concierge to share and direct students to appropriate resources. Coaches also check student grades to support any at-risk students on a personal level to increase retention and support overall program satisfaction. While the academic department's program manager serves as the advisor of record, removing holds and maintaining SIS access, the coaches develop personalized coaching relationships with students to promote success throughout a student's entire program experience until graduation.

System Access

The university grants OPM partner individuals credential access for the admissions portal and LMS, as appropriate to the role. Student-facing roles additionally are provided with a university email address to promote university representation and support. However, they are not provided access to the university's SIS, indicating there needs to be a constant dialogue between OPM and academic department to support students and to function program wide.

OPM and Academic Department Perceptions of Value

I observed four meetings over a span of one month to further gather data on the OPM and academic department perceptions of the value co-creation of the partnership. The specific meetings I attended were held to prepare for a new program launching in January 2023. All meetings I attended were held in March 2022, evidencing that planning and development of a new program starts well before its launch. I attended two discovery meetings, one creative concepts meeting, and one student services and engagement meeting. Summaries of these meetings are provided in this section, highlighting specific components that evidence perceptions and elements of the VCC model.

To understand and strategically plan a new program, the OPM and academic department held a series of "discovery meetings." These meetings occur frequently before the launch of new programs for the OPM to discuss program goals, branding strategies, and target audience. As a participant-observer, I attended two discovery meetings for a new academic program set to launch in an upcoming term. Attendees from the academic department included the associate dean of graduate and executive education, the executive director of graduate and executive education, the department's executive director, and two program managers for other programs within the department. Twelve attendees from the OPM included general management team

members (i.e., roles that support overall program operations including a regional general manager, a local general manager, and an operations manager); marketing team members (i.e., the vice president of market research, a managing director of brand strategy, the marketing director, a managing director of creative and strategic branding, the director of digital optimization strategy, and a brand strategist); technology solutions team members (i.e., roles that support the overall technology and infrastructure of programs and system integrations including the director of solutions architecture and a solutions coordinator); and an enrollment director.

One of the discovery meetings was held in person at the academic department's building on campus and lasted four hours. Upon the arrival of OPM representatives, friendly hugs and handshakes were shared, along with active and engaged conversations about personal lives and casual jokes. This suggests a level of trust and comradery that have been established over time. The meeting started in the morning and coffee and muffins were provided, suggesting a hospitable relationship.

While casual interactions occurred beforehand, the meeting was focused on the intended purpose. There was an extensive amount of knowledge and resource sharing between partners as the OPM's marketing team provided specific marketing expertise, while the academic department provided specific target audience personas, mission and values, and program information for marketing efforts. The academic department provided the institutional branding guidelines and student testimonials to be used. The OPM representatives asked thought-provoking questions to guide the discussion, such as "how are students actively learning in the program?" and "what skills are acquired in the program?" In general, questions addressed the department's preferred terminology, student experience, faculty, reputational history, and intended vision. The academic department's brand, network and alumni, rankings, and diversity

and inclusion efforts were discussed at length. At the conclusion of the meeting, the department provided lunch where casual friendly conversations about family and weekend plans continued. Additionally, during lunch, the OPM representatives invited the academic department team to join them for dinner, further highlighting that personal relationships, while professional, have developed over the length of the three-year partnership.

Due to the detailed discussion of the in-person meeting, it was determined a second discovery meeting was needed. The second meeting occurred with the same attendees over Zoom, and it was recorded for future reference. The previous conversation continued during this meeting, and the same sense of trust and friendliness was displayed virtually with discussions about individuals' personal well-being both before and after the meeting. Further, all cameras were on, and meeting attendees were active contributors to the discussion.

It was evident the OPM-department partnership is based in collaboration as the partners gathered to comprehensively understand the program to brand it appropriately. Further, the OPM's expertise and commitment to understanding the academic department was evidenced multiple times. One example was when the OPM's managing director of creative and strategic branding suggested a branding slogan and the executive director of the academic department exclaimed, "that just gave me the chills!" Another example was when the OPM's general manager was able to communicate the department's unique characteristics on behalf of the academic department, and the representatives of the academic department wholeheartedly agreed with responses of "well said!" from the associate dean and "you get paid extra today!" from the department's executive director.

Following the discovery meetings, I observed one "creative concepts meeting." The purpose of this meeting was to translate the discussions from the discovery meetings into

tangible marketing deliverables. While I only attended one of these meetings, the OPM and department would continue meeting as necessary until marketing details were finalized. The one-hour meeting I attended was held over Zoom and recorded. Attendees from the department included the executive director of graduate and executive education, the department's executive director, and the same two program managers that attended the discovery meetings. Seven OPM representatives attended, including the general manager, the operations manager, the marketing director, a managing director of creative and strategic branding, the director of digital optimization strategy, a senior copywriting specialist, and a brand strategist.

In this creative concepts meeting, the OPM's marketing and branding teams delivered four visual media themes, each theme including suggested social media posts, headlines, and branding efforts for marketing campaigns, based on the discussions at the discovery meetings. The OPM's managing director of creative and strategic branding explained the visuals, and the academic department provided immediate feedback, confirming approval or suggesting a new direction. Examples of feedback included when one of the program managers referenced a visual theme and stated, "I don't like that color at all- it makes it feel apocalyptic." Another example was when the executive director of graduate and executive education stated that she felt one of the photos in the second visual theme felt "stuffy," and she suggested a more casual image to communicate the flexibility of the program. Timelines for revisions were discussed before the conclusion of the meeting, at which point attendees waved goodbye as they departed.

I also observed one student services and engagement meeting. While the purpose of these bi-weekly meetings varies regarding student support, the purpose of the specific meeting observed was to discuss the creation and filming timeline of orientation videos for the upcoming new program launch. Attendees included the department's executive director and a program

manager from another program within the academic department, as well as the OPM's director of student success in the region and a manager of student support and engagement. It was a virtual meeting over Zoom in which the director of student success shared her screen for live single-text editing of meeting minute notes, suggesting collaboration for accuracy and transparency. Further, she asked the academic department representatives to read through the entire orientation blueprint that the OPM created and identify anything they did not agree with, make sure it aligned with their values, and provide any additional updated information. As in the other observed meetings, this meeting included casual, friendly discussions before and after the work session. The OPM's director of student success suggested getting dinner with the program manager when she planned to fly into town for the filming activities. Additionally, the executive director inquired about the support coach's recent dissertation defense, and when it was proclaimed that she successfully defended there was a verbal celebration. The executive director further joked about supporting the coach but not wanting to lose her (e.g., if she were to leave the partnership, she would be happy for her but experience feelings of loss). This interaction suggested value and a positive relationship between partners.

Using the qualitative data from observation fieldnotes, I searched for patterns, concepts, and insights that seemed promising for answering the research question using an analytic technique known as pattern matching, which was previously described in chapter 3. I compared empirically based patterns (i.e., findings from the case study) with a predicted pattern (i.e., the VCC model). According to Yin (2018), if the empirical and predicted patterns appear similar, the internal validity of findings is enhanced.

To determine empirically based patterns, I conducted *a priori* coding, also known as theoretical coding. This process involved coding data based on the core tenets of a theoretical

framework or paradigm, seeking congruence and variance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Data were coded against the dimensional elements of the VCC model as themes and subthemes. I found that all elements of the VCC model were represented in the observation fieldnotes. For example, the theme of *co-production* was evidenced by the subtheme of *knowledge* in the discovery meetings through the OPM marketing team sharing of knowledge about market opportunities (e.g., market research snapshots on number of jobs in the discipline, unique jobs posted, number of programs conferring degrees in the discipline in 2020, compound annual graduate rate, median salary, 10-year job growth projections, etc.); and the academic department shared specific target personas and student stories for development of a potential prospective student pool. The subtheme of *equity* was shown when the OPM student support team shared the orientation blueprint during the student support and engagement meeting, and when the academic department provided access to the university marketing and branding guidelines in a discovery meeting. The subtheme of *interaction* was demonstrated during all meetings with continuous dialogue and instant feedback being shared.

Further, the theme of *value-in-use* was evidenced by the subtheme of *experience* in the in-person discovery meeting due to the positive and hospitable environment with refreshments provided, jokes shared, and feelings of familiarity and trust presented. The subtheme of *personalization* was shown during discovery meetings because the discussion was centered on discovering the unique characteristics and branding of the program. Further, the subtheme of *relationship* was demonstrated during all observed meetings with the casual and personal conversations before and after meetings, as well as the fact that all cameras were on, and partners were engaged on all virtual meetings. Appendix C includes specific examples of interactions and details, and how these elements align with the themes of the VCC model.

Student Perception of Value

Vargo and Lusch (2004) suggested that a co-produced program or service does not actually hold any value until the consumer assigns value upon it. The goal of the academic department (i.e., consumer) is to produce a quality program for their students (i.e., customers). Therefore, it can be argued that the department's perception of value is related to their student perception of value. To identify student perceptions of program value, I analyzed quantitative and qualitative data from anonymous student surveys administered by the initial OPM-supported program in the partnership. Survey data spanned from Fall 2019 to Spring 2022 and included data from first-term surveys, graduation exit surveys, and alumni surveys. Surveys are administered each term (i.e., spring, summer, and fall terms) to the corresponding student audience. While they are easily identifiable by term, individual student responses are anonymous; therefore, student demographics were not captured.

In total, 21 student surveys were analyzed (16 first term surveys, 4 graduate exit surveys, and 1 alumni survey). Each survey had between 25-85% response rates. I compiled quantitative data to compare net promoter scores (NPS) across terms. Further, I conducted a convergent mixed methods analysis of the survey's qualitative and quantitative data to compare and combine results to obtain a more complete understanding, to validate one set of findings with the other, and to determine whether survey participants responded similarly to inquiries presented in different ways (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative data pertaining to students' impressions of the program were compiled and coded for emergent themes using emergent coding, also known as open or *in vivo* coding. Simultaneously, Likert scale data pertaining to initial program impressions and overall experience in the program were analyzed against the

emergent themes. Graduate and alumni survey data are also briefly described to add additional context.

Net Promotor Scores

Net promoter score (NPS) often is regarded as the gold standard of customer experience metrics (Perspective, 2019). Quantitative data from student surveys about the program experience were compiled to compare NPS across terms and to analyze value as perceived by the students. NPS is based on one question: "How likely is it that you would recommend [organization/product/service] to a friend or colleague?" Scores are reported with a number from the range -100 to +100, with a higher positive score being desirable (Qualtrics, 2022). General guidelines indicate that any NPS above 0 is "good," above 20 is "favorable," above 50 is "excellent," and above 80 is "world class" (Perspective). Table 4.2 displays the results of this comparison.

All NPS scores across terms and student surveys resulted in a "favorable" NPS, indicating that students generally favored the program and would recommend it to a friend or colleague. Six of the eight term intakes earned an "excellent" NPS in the beginning of term surveys, indicating that students held a positive perception of value when they initially started the program. All eight term intakes earned an "excellent" NPS by the end of term surveys, suggesting a general improved perception of value, even when accounting for four terms with a negative difference in NPS over the first term. All (100%) graduate exit surveys showed a "favorable" NPS, indicating satisfaction and a positive perception of value from program graduates. As Table 4.2 depicts, there are various fluctuations in NPS across terms. This may be due to changes in program processes as the program scaled, different support coaches assisting with onboarding, or personal students' circumstances.

Table 4.2

Program Net Promoter Scores Per Student Intake

Term	BOT Survey		EOT Survey		Graduate Exit Survey	
	Response	NPS	Response	NPS	Response	NPS
Fall 2019	58%	45.5	50%	56.25	N/A	N/A
Spring 2020	56%	50	69%	68.18	N/A	N/A
Summer 2020	45.8%	36.36	29%	83.33	N/A	N/A
Fall 2020	51%	58.33	41%	65.22	N/A	N/A
Spring 2021	76.7%	62.5	81%	57.58	50%	66.67
Summer 2021	52.3%	100	85%	82.35	50%	75
Fall 2021	38%	80	40%	66.67	25%	33.3
Spring 2022	68%	77.78	40%	63.64	63%	72.22

Note. NPS is based on one question: “How likely is it that you would recommend [organization/product/service] to a friend or colleague?” Scores are reported with a number from the range -100 to +100, with a higher score being desirable (Qualtrics, 2022).

NPS Legend: > 0 = Good; > 20 = Favorable; > 50 = Excellent; > 80 = World Class (Perspective, 2019).

Convergent Analysis

A convergent mixed methodology analysis occurs when results of the qualitative and the quantitative data analysis are compared and/or combined to obtain a more complete understanding of results, to validate one set of findings with the other, and/or to determine whether survey participants respond similarly to inquiries presented in different ways (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative data pertaining to students' impressions of the program were compiled, and I coded them for emergent themes using emergent coding, also known as open or *in vivo* coding. Simultaneously, I analyzed Likert scale data pertaining to initial program impressions and overall experience in the program, and I compared findings against the emergent themes. Both qualitative findings and quantitative results are described in the following section.

Emergent Themes

Four themes suggesting student perception of program value emerged while coding survey data: opinions and experiences with *preparation*, *community*, *support*, and *program design*. The following paragraphs detail the emergent themes. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 show convergent quantitative analysis of beginning and end of term surveys, respectfully. Further, table 4.5 illustrates a convergent analysis results joint display showing how qualitative and quantitative findings compare.

Preparation refers to how equipped a student felt for the program. References to the admissions and onboarding experience were coded into this theme, as well as any reference to the type of resources provided. Additionally, any references to feeling prepared or confident were coded into this theme. When asked to provide open-ended feedback about their experience in the program, one student stated, "[Enrollment advisor] and [support coach] are great assets to the university. They prepared me to succeed in this program." Another respondent declared:

Table 4.3

Beginning of Term Quantitative Survey Results

Question	Term							
	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Summer 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022
My enrollment advisor was helpful during the process of applying	4.59 (N/A)	4.67 (.47)	4.73 (.45)	4.63 (.56)	4.72 (.76)	4.73 (.45)	4.9 (.3)	4.63 (.55)
The asynchronous orientation course prepared me well	4.09 (N/A)	4 (.82)	4.09 (.79)	4.25 (.78)	4.34 (.73)	4.64 (.48)	4.4 (.66)	4.11 (.87)
The Welcome Live orientation with faculty/staff prepared me well	4.18 (N/A)	4.22 (.85)	4 (.74)	4.25 (.78)	4.5 (.61)	4.64 (.48)	4.5 (.67)	4.3 (.76)
The Getting Ready Live sessions with my SSC prepared me well	4.14 (N/A)	4.22 (.85)	4 (.74)	4.21 (.91)	4.34 (.77)	4.55 (.66)	4.3 (.78)	4.44 (.68)
I feel supported in this program	4.41 (N/A)	4.39 (.59)	4.18 (1.2)	4.63 (.48)	4.66 (.54)	4.82 (.39)	4.8 (.4)	4.56 (.63)
The program is meeting my expectations	4.27 (N/A)	4.39 (.59)	4.18 (.94)	4.54 (.76)	4.59 (.55)	4.73 (.45)	4.85 (.36)	4.44 (.68)
There is someone in the program who encourages me	N/A	N/A	3.73 (1.3)	3.88 (.88)	3.91 (.91)	3.91 (.67)	4.05 (.86)	3.78 (.92)
I am confident I will succeed in this program	4.41 (N/A)	4.39 (.76)	4.55 (.89)	4.58 (.57)	4.47 (.5)	4.64 (.48)	4.7 (.46)	4.59 (.68)
I feel like I am part of a community in this program	3.82 (N/A)	4.28 (.65)	4.27 (.86)	4.33 (.75)	4.25 (.75)	4.45 (.5)	4.5 (.5)	4.11 (.69)
I have a friend in the program	N/A	N/A	3.55 (1)	3.58 (1.2)	3.41 (1.3)	3 (1)	3.4 (1)	3.41 (.95)

Notes. The students were asked "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree)
Results are presented as Mean (SD). Fall 2019 data did not capture SD.

Table 4.4

End of Term Quantitative Survey Results

Question	Term							
	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Summer 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022
My experience in the program so far has been great	4.2 (1)	4.29 (.45)	4.71 (.45)	4.25 (1)	4.17 (.69)	4.5 (.5)	4.6 (.49)	4.26 (N/A)
This program is of high quality	4.47 (.88)	4.29 (.45)	4.57 (.49)	4.75 (.54)	4.33 (.7)	4.88 (.33)	4.6 (.49)	4.37 (N/A)
I feel supported in this program	4.6 (.49)	4.14 (.64)	4.86 (.35)	4.55 (.67)	4.27 (.73)	4.81 (.39)	4.4 (.49)	4.42 (N/A)
The online campus is easy to navigate	4.29 (.7)	4.14 (.64)	4.71 (.45)	4.15 (.65)	4.34 (.71)	4.44 (.7)	4.2 (.4)	4.42 (N/A)
The online campus is inviting	4.36 (.61)	3.86 (.64)	4.71 (.45)	4.15 (.73)	4.37 (.71)	4.25 (.83)	4 (.63)	4.26 (N/A)
I feel like I am part of a community in this program	4.13 (.81)	3.71 (.45)	4.29 (1)	4 (.84)	4.23 (.8)	4.38 (.7)	4.4 (.49)	4.05 (N/A)
This program is meeting my expectations	4.13 (1)	4.14 (.64)	4.71 (.45)	4.45 (.67)	4.23 (.72)	4.56 (.5)	4.4 (.49)	4.26 (N/A)
I have a friend in the program	N/A	4 (1)	3.86 (.83)	3.3 (1.1)	3.57 (1.2)	3.5 (1.3)	3.6 (1.4)	3.63 (N/A)
There is someone in the program who encourages me	N/A	3.57 (1.1)	3.86 (1.1)	3.7 (1)	3.73 (1)	4.06 (.97)	4 (.63)	4.11 (N/A)

Notes. The students were asked “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree)
Results are presented as Mean (SD). Spring 2022 data did not capture SD.

Table 4.5

Convergent Analysis Results Joint Display

Emergent Theme	Representative Quotations	Quantitative Statements	Quantitative Results Summary
Preparation	"[Enrollment advisor] and [support coach] are great assets to the university. They prepared me to succeed in this program."	"The asynchronous orientation course prepared me well for this program" "The live orientation with faculty and staff prepared me well for this program" "I am confident I will succeed in this program"	Mean score > 4 (agree or strongly agree) achieved across statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term SD ranged from .46-.89 across identified statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term
Community	"I love the interaction I have with my classmates and the openness of the faculty." "I was hesitant because I thought I would feel disconnected socially during this program, but that hasn't been the case! Who knew I'd make friends with people through Microsoft Teams!"	"I feel like I am part of a community in this program" "I have a friend in the program"	Mean score fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree) across statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term SD ranged from .5-1.3 across identified statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term Mean score fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree) across statements and all term intakes at the end of first term SD ranged from .45-1.4 across identified statements and all term intakes at the end of first term

Table 4.5 Continued.

Emergent Theme	Representative Quotations	Quantitative Statements	Quantitative Results Summary
Support	"I have had some difficulty in a particular class and the professor has worked with me to help me better understand."	"My enrollment advisor was helpful during the process of applying to this program" "I feel supported in this program" "There is someone in the program who encourages me"	Mean scores fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree) across statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term SD ranged from .3-1.3 across identified statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term Mean score fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree) across statements and all term intakes at the end of first term SD ranged from .35-1.1 across identified statements and all term intakes at the end of first term
Program Design	"I really enjoy the structure of the modules. I feel it exposes me to information multiple times but in different ways. As a result, I feel I am retaining what I am learning." "It allows me to balance my working life with my school life. I appreciate that it is truly created as an online experience, not a regular class that happens to be visible online."	"This program is of high quality" "The online campus is easy to navigate" "The online campus is inviting"	Mean score fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree) across statements and all term intakes at the end of first term SD ranged from .33-.88 across identified statements and all term intakes at the end of first term

> The onboarding experience was fantastic. There were quite a few tasks to complete but the various orientation videos, text, and zoom sessions with [support coach] were great. All of the faculty and staff want the students to succeed and they have offered to help with whatever is needed. Since I have not been in school for over 20 years and was not familiar with the 'flipped' instruction methodology, the first couple of weeks had a steep learning curve but I am growing much more comfortable navigating around Canvas, etc. each week.

Convergent quantitative analysis of Likert scale questions in the survey corroborated these statements. When asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "the asynchronous orientation course prepared me well for this program," a mean score greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree) was achieved across statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term, with standard deviations ranging from .48 to .82. When asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "the live orientation with faculty and staff prepared me well for this program," a mean score greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree) was achieved across statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term, with standard deviations ranging from .48 to .85. Further, when asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "I am confident I will succeed in this program," a mean score of greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree) was achieved across statements and all term intakes at the beginning of first term, with standard deviations ranging from .46 to .89.

Community refers to a student's sense of belonging and feelings about interactions with faculty and other students. Overall, findings indicate students felt a sense of community. When asked to provide open-ended feedback about their experience in the program, one student stated, "I was hesitant because I thought I would feel disconnected socially during this program, but that

hasn't been the case! Who knew I'd make friends with people through Microsoft Teams!" Another respondent declared, "I love the interaction I have with my classmates and the openness of the faculty."

Quantitative analyses of Likert scale questions in the surveys supported these statements. When asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "I feel like I am part of a community in this program" all mean results across all term intakes fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree) in the beginning of term surveys, with standard deviations ranging from .5 to .86. Similarly, in the end of term surveys, all means related to this statement fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree), with a larger variance in standard deviations, which ranged from .45 to 1. In response to "I have a friend in the program" all mean results across all term intakes fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree), with standard deviations ranging from .95 to 1.3. Likewise, in the end of term surveys, all means related to this statement fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree), but had a larger variance in standard deviations, which ranged from .83 to 1.4. This data suggests that while students vary more often with feeling they have specific friends in the program during their first term, there is less variance for feeling part of a community. While not all students are looking to develop a sense of community or friends in a program, as was noted in some qualitative responses, these questions and the mean results suggest a sense of connection and community.

Support refers to sense of aid and assistance experienced in the program. References to the support of enrollment advisors, support coaches, faculty and other staff, and any experiences with the program technology helpdesk were coded into this theme. When asked to provide open-ended feedback about their experience in the program, one respondent stated, "I have had some difficulty in a particular class and the professor has worked with me to help me better

understand." Another respondent stated, "I think how approachable [the program] made the process. From applying, to getting ready, to taking the classes. There has been a lot of support."

Quantitative analyses of Likert scale questions in the survey supported these statements. When asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "My enrollment advisor was helpful during the process of applying to this program," a mean score of greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree) was achieved across all term intakes at the beginning of first term, with standard deviations ranging from .3 to .76. When asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "I feel supported in this program," students chose a mean score of greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree) across all term intakes at both the beginning of first term (SD range from .39 to 1.2) and the end of the first term (SD range from .35 to .73). Additionally, when asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "There is someone in the program who encourages me," students chose a mean score that fell between 3 (neutral) to 5 (strongly agree), and the standard deviations depict variance with a range from .67 to 1.3 in the beginning of the term, and .63 to 1.1 at the end of the term. While there is more variance in the quantitative data about program support, all mean results are neutral or greater in agreement with the statements of support.

Program design refers to student experience and satisfaction with the design of the program. Any qualitative references to the flexibility, content, delivery, format, or technology used were coded into this theme. Additionally, any specific course feedback was comprised into the theme. When asked to provide open-ended feedback about their experience in the program, one respondent stated, "I really enjoy the structure of the modules. I feel it exposes me to information multiple times but in different ways. As a result, I feel I am retaining what I am learning." Another student stated, "It allows me to balance my working life with my school life. I

appreciate that it is truly created as an online experience, not a regular class that happens to be visible online." While some students noted discontent with one specific course, overall, many noted how impressed they were with the organization of the program and how it was structured for working professionals.

Quantitative analyses of Likert scale questions in the survey corroborated these statements. When asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "This program is of high quality," students chose a mean score of greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree), with standard deviations ranging from .33 to .88. Similarly, when asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "The online campus is easy to navigate," students chose a mean score of greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree), with standard deviations ranging from .4 to .71, indicating satisfaction and value. Further, when asked to choose the level of agreement with the statement, "The online campus is inviting," students chose a mean score that fell between 3 (neutral) and 5 (strongly agree), with standard deviations ranging from .45 to .83. Overall, all mean results were neutral or greater in agreement with the statements related to program design.

Graduate Exit and Alumni Survey Results

Graduate exit surveys are administered to graduating students upon their last week in the program to gage their overall program experience and how it relates to their careers. Table 4.6 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations of statements inquired upon.

Across four graduation terms, all mean results were neutral or greater in agreement with the statements. To note, statements related to instruction (i.e., "My instructors were supportive" and "I experienced high-quality instruction in the courses") and to program content as it related to careers (i.e., "The program helped me understand and explore career pathways" and "The skills and knowledge I learned from the program are relevant to my career goals") achieved

Table 4.6

Graduate Exit Quantitative Survey Results

Question	Term			
	Spring 2021	Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022
The program helped me understand and explore career pathways	4.4 (.49)	4 (.76)	4.33 (.94)	4.47 (N/A)
The skills and knowledge I learned from the program are relevant to my career goals	4.8 (.4)	4.67 (.47)	4.67 (.47)	4.69 (N/A)
The courses were appropriately challenging	4.4 (.49)	3.43 (1.3)	4.67 (.47)	4.53 (N/A)
My instructors were supportive	5 (0)	4.5 (.5)	4.67 (.47)	4.41 (N/A)
I experienced high-quality instruction in the courses	4.4 (.8)	4.57 (.49)	4.67 (.47)	4.39 (N/A)
My program was responsive to student concerns	5 (0)	4.14 (.64)	3.67 (.47)	4.44 (N/A)
My program fostered a sense of community among the students	4.4 (.49)	4 (.93)	3.67 (.47)	4.39 (N/A)

Notes. The students were asked “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree) Results are presented as Mean (SD). Spring 2022 data did not capture SD.

mean results greater than 4 (agree or strongly agree), all with standard deviations between 0 and 1. This quantitative data compares to and validates first term survey data. The similarity of results to the qualitative and quantitative first term data suggests reliability, as well as maintenance of perceived value throughout the program.

Alumni surveys are distributed to program graduates six months post-graduation to gather data related to employment and career progression. Alumni surveys from spring 2021 to summer 2022 were compiled and analyzed. According to the alumni survey results, with a 38% response rate, 100% of respondents were employed at the time of the survey, and 100% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the graduate program's impact on their career progression. These results suggest a long-term perception of value from the program's students.

Chapter Summary

After data collection, I conducted thorough analyses of data to triangulate the overall concept of VCC and value perception. This chapter summarized results of the analyses. An overview of the partnership was provided through rich description of the OPM, the academic department, and the partnership functionality, which was supported by department data and document analysis (i.e., analysis of websites). Findings derived from document analysis and observation fieldnotes suggest the OPM's and academic department's perceptions of value and how that value was co-created. Furthermore, findings derived from archival records analyses (i.e., student surveys) suggest an overall positive student perception of value. A broader discussion on findings and specifically how they relate to the VCC model are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction to Chapter

An increasing amount of higher education administrators and institutions partner with online program management providers (OPMs) to deliver distance education, suggesting there is a value proposition that OPMs help institutions or academic colleges, departments, or programs achieve results and accountability; they create conditional, perceived value. However, because academic programs are still institutional initiatives, they are never fully outsourced and require collaboration (Maloney & Kim, 2021). Therefore, the following research question was investigated: *How does an OPM co-create value with an institutional partner?* Value co-creation (VCC) has been extensively studied within business research (Ranjan & Read, 2016), but it has minimally been explored in educational research.

The purpose of this study was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of entities of higher education partnering with OPMs. I accomplished this objective through an in-depth, revelatory case study of value co-creation as experienced in the partnership between a doctoral research institution, specifically an academic department, and its OPM provider. The partnership was analyzed to unveil how the academic department and OPM operated within their partnership and to what extent the partnership revealed the dimensional elements of value co-creation. Data from archival records, documents, and observations were gathered and analyzed. A rich description was provided along with findings in chapter 4 to promote transferability for institutional administrators.

This chapter serves as a discussion to further explore the findings noted in chapter 4. An answer to the research question will be posed by directly relating the findings to the VCC model.

Furthermore, implications for higher education will be discussed and recommendations for future research will be provided.

Answering the Research Question with VCC

The purpose of this study was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of OPMs partnering with higher education entities. This purpose was addressed using a case study approach to analyze how an academic department and OPM operated within their partnership and to what extent the partnership revealed the dimensional elements of VCC. OPMs suggest a value proposition of helping institutional agents achieve results and accountability through development and maintenance assistance of online programs. Therefore, this study was guided by the research question: *How does an OPM co-create value with an institutional partner?* The VCC model provided a lens to develop and understand the answer. Based on the findings presented in chapter 4, the answer includes collaboration, resources, and transparency, as outlined in the VCC model (see Appendix C). The OPM supported a perception of value for the students and for the academic department. Simultaneously, the partnership created a perception of value for the OPM as they improved their practices and efficiency (e.g., the instructional design practice evolution over time). While the case site utilized a full suite of OPM services, the academic department did not fully outsource program initiatives and maintained ownership of the program, content, and data. Through collaboration, resource sharing, and transparent practices, students were provided a quality program.

Triangulating data gathered from three data sources, the case site exhibited all six of the elements of the VCC model (see Appendix C). In summary, *co-production* was achieved through the elements of *knowledge*, *equity*, and *interaction*. Co-production integrates resources early in the phase of creation and production of a program (Lusch & Vargo, 2006), and this was

evidenced through observations of planning meetings for a new, upcoming program. The academic department was engaged throughout design, knowledge production, and feedback, which impacts value proposition (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). Continuous dialogue facilitated collaboration (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). There was a more equal sense of responsibility than in traditional producer-consumer exchanges because the academic department integrated their knowledge and experiences and interacted as part of the team with the partner organization (Mark, 2013).

Sharing *knowledge* was the main purpose of the meetings observed, and positive interactions were seen through casual and friendly conversations surrounding the meetings. Sharing resources such as data, platforms, and personnel (e.g., enrollment advisors and support coaches) evidenced *equity*. However, one equity shortcoming found was that coaches were not given access to the institution's SIS. The academic department, however, addressed this with constant communication between program manager and coaches, which created more interaction between partners. Regardless, all interactions observed demonstrated an alliance relationship (Vargo et al., 2008) because the academic department was able to produce feedback at any time, on all elements related to co-production or the partnership (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The document analysis further supported these results because data gathered from the websites included information about sharing knowledge and resources and interaction components of the partnership.

Furthermore, *value-in-use (ViU)* was achieved through the elements of *experience, personalization,* and *relationship*. ViU conceptualizes that whatever is co-produced does not actually hold any value until the consumer imposes value upon it (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The concept argues that partner organizations do not solely provide value, but rather they and

consumers both play active roles in the process to create value together (Diaz-Mendes & Gummesson, 2012). Both the academic department and the OPM played active roles in program creation.

The fact that the academic department is continuing to launch additional programs with the OPM partnership is one signal of a positive *experience*. The positive interactions observed at meetings support this notion. *Personalization* was evidenced through observation fieldnotes as the discovery meetings included a thorough analysis of the uniqueness of the academic department and its programs. The academic department staff were able to produce feedback and modify the program and processes during the partnership to ensure the academic program was personalized to their needs, goals, and messaging. The document analysis further supports these results because data gathered from the websites included information about personalization. The overall *relationship* between the OPM and academic partnership appears positive based on the level of engagement and collaboration observed. Furthermore, the archival record analyses of prior survey data demonstrated positive perceptions of value for students and graduates. Across eight intake terms, survey results evidenced value. Accountability for quality and career outcomes also was achieved as evidenced by graduate exit survey data. Because the students (i.e., consumer's customers) perceived value in the program, the academic department (i.e., consumer) perceived value in the relationship and overall partnership with the OPM (i.e., partner organization).

However, finances play a role in value proposition throughout the entire value co-creation process. While the specific exchange value (i.e., monetary transaction) in the case was not explicit, the documentation analysis detailed the general fee structure for services and suggested that the OPM in this case offered a better financial economic model that its

competitors. It is important to note that the purpose of the OPM's website is to attract new partnerships and its website presents natural bias as a for-profit business. Considering the department did not meet enrollment goals each of the eight terms, one may question the return on investment (ROI) and how not meeting enrollment goals impacted the department and its overall program costs. Although these goals were not met for three of the intake terms, the program continued to scale. Therefore, the academic department continued to invest in the partnership. Plans to launch new programs evidence the continued long-term investment.

Based on the evidence of co-production and value-in-use, value co-creation was exhibited in the case site, supported by collaboration, resources, and transparency. The examples provided throughout the study evidenced how the OPM co-created value with the institutional partner. Value was demonstrated by alignment with all elements of the VCC model. Based on these findings, the OPM overall delivered on their value proposition. With the exception of meeting enrollment goals each term and the early issues regarding instructional design satisfaction, the partnership met the academic department's expectations of sharing resources to "offer a superior package to targeted customers" (Payne et al., 2017, p. 472) (i.e., students). The OPM created conditional, perceived value for the academic department. Further, because the academic department collaborated transparently within the VCC model dimensions, the department concurrently created both perceived and exchange value (i.e., payment for services) for the OPM.

Implications for Higher Education

While value co-creation has been extensively studied within business research (Ranjan & Read, 2016), it has been minimally explored in educational research. This study was revelatory, examining the value co-creation process between an OPM and higher education agents,

specifically at the academic department level, to better understand the value proposition of these partnerships.

Partnering with an OPM may be an expensive investment, but findings from this study suggest that there is potential reward in the form of quality online programs or ROI for institutional agents who pursue these partnerships. However, it is important to highlight the risk of not getting a ROI if enrollment goals are not met, as well as the potential timeline to earn a ROI. As noted in chapter 4, three of the eight intake terms analyzed in this case did not meet enrollment goals. Due to this situation, the academic department had still not made a return on investment. It may be multiple years before revenue surpasses the cost of the partnership. Additionally important to note, the case academic department was embedded in a business school at an R1 university (very high research activity). The college and department regularly receive million-dollar endowments from donors and alumni. Therefore, the department's funding, and therefore capabilities of taking on financial risk, may look different from other academic colleges and departments. OPM partnerships are generally expensive investments, and as the VCC model displays, finances need to be considered well before and throughout a partnership.

Even so, findings from this study suggest that value is co-created in the partnership if all dimensional elements of the VCC model are positively evidenced. The clearer the evidence, the stronger the perceived value. However, the student perception of value holds extensive weight. Institutional agents may have positive relationships and experiences within the OPM partnership, but if the students do not enroll in the program or find it of quality, the value-in-use is diminished and ROI may be restricted, impacting the overall experience of the partnership and whether institutional expectations are met.

Considerations for Community and Support

Four themes (i.e., opinions and experiences with *preparation, community, support,* and *program design*) were discussed in chapter 4. Standard deviations for *community* and *support* were noteworthy for further discussion because they were higher, and in some terms were higher than 1. A small standard deviation, relative to the value of the mean itself, indicates that the data points are close to the mean (Field, 2013). A standard deviation of 0 indicates that all the scores were the same, evidencing alignment of responses. The closer the standard deviation is to 0, the less variance there is to consider, making results more reliable. The larger a standard deviation, relative to the mean, indicates that data points are distant from the mean and there is more fluctuation in responses (Field).

While mean results of first term surveys indicated that students felt a sense of community in the program, the standard deviation for some terms was as high as 1.4, specifically for the statement, "I have a friend in the program." Similarly, while mean results of first term surveys indicated that students felt supported in the program, the standard deviation for some terms was as high as 1.3 for the statement, "There is someone in the program who encourages me." Online learners need a strong sense of connection and proactive support systems to help foster success and retention (Crawley, 2012). Providing coaches for online learning has been found to enhance student performance and retention (Park & Robinson, 2022), but the variance of the responses to these statements demonstrates there is room for improvement for creating connections between students and a community of support. The surveys were anonymous, and the lack of demographic data related to responses limits a critical analysis of the variances. However, variances may impact retention and persistence to graduation. While not every student is looking to make friends in the program, as noted in qualitative data from the surveys, establishing a sense

of community and support is a best practice for distance education (Crawley, 2012). The OPM provided coaches specifically to provide student support and engagement opportunities for students, but student opinions and experiences in these realms varied. Coach case loads may impact the degrees of variance, or the modality of distance education may present different experiences for students based on their previous educational experiences and program expectations. Future research is suggested to investigate fostering a sense of community and support within OPM-supported programs to determine if there are better methods of connecting and supporting students in distance education programs.

Increased Competition and Resource Inequities

Distance education has evidenced its legitimacy as an instructional delivery method in part because of its rich history, increasingly sophisticated technological infrastructure, accrediting bodies, and acceptance by Ivy League universities as a viable and profitable instructional mode (Casey, 2008; Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2021; Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015). As online program offerings and enrollments in distance education continue to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Lederman, 2021), other institutional agents may consider OPM partnerships. The market for online programs is increasingly becoming more competitive, and institutions without expertise or resources to develop and maintain online programs may need additional support to meet institutional goals (Murray, 2019). However, as more institutions partner with OPMs, the market and competition in the distance education landscape may become convoluted with programs of similar design and quality benchmarks. While this may increase educational opportunities for students, enrollment decisions for students may become more difficult, thus creating a more stagnant enrollment funnel for these programs (e.g., leads may not convert into applicants or admitted students may not yield into enrolled students).

Furthermore, because OPM partnerships have a significant financial element associated with them, academic units with more financial resources may continue to grow and monopolize the distance education market, while those that may not be able to afford a partnership have to make decisions about whether they create online offerings internally or whether to offer online opportunities at all.

As noted in chapter 2, *contingency theory* (Galbraith, 1973) prescribes the survival and success of organizations depends on how well they adapt to their environments to gain competitive advantage. Similarly, *resource-advantage theory* notes that resources enable competitive advantage (Vivek et al., 2021). Therefore, academic units that already have more resources have the capability to continue to build a competitive advantage, and resource discrepancies between departments, colleges, and institutions may intensify. As resource discrepancy gaps increase and as OPM partnerships alter higher education practices and decisions about distance education, some academic units may struggle to adapt and survive. Additionally, this has the potential to further enlarge inequities, not only at the institutional level but also at the student level when considering institutions that primarily serve historically underrepresented students. Researchers have shown institutions serving larger percentages of historically underrepresented students often lack the resources to invest in accountability metrics (Boland, 2018). Resource gaps already exist between institutions and departments, and based on the demographics of certain academic units, these gaps may enlarge based on who can invest in OPM partnerships as a distance education initiative.

Faculty and Personnel Considerations

There also are faculty and personnel considerations and implications with OPM partnerships. It is important to investigate OPM models to ensure that faculty maintain their

academic freedom and intellectual property. While the case OPM recognized faculty as subject matter experts and course owners, and transparently practiced collaboration with faculty, this may not be the circumstance for all OPM arrangements. Ramani (2020) found that faculty pedagogical differences may alter their approaches to collaborating with OPMs and instructional designers. Institutional agents should research the specifics related to instructional design practices of OPMs and may need to dually ensure that faculty understand and feel comfortable with the partnership and processes involved. Institutional agents may even need to offer additional incentives for faculty to build courses and teach in these OPM-supported programs.

Furthermore, because the OPM is a for-profit business, institutions cannot assume that OPM personnel are dedicated to solely working with their individual programs. There is a possibility that the economic model of OPMs promotes shared personnel to reduce overall costs. In this case, the shared personnel may be working to support an institution's competitors as well. Therefore, the fees that institutions pay for services may be dually compensating services for competitors.

Transferability

This case study focused on one academic department and one OPM (specifically an OPM using a fee-for-services financial model); therefore, it does not capture experiences or details of all institutional partnerships with OPMs. Furthermore, perceived value is subjective in nature. However, the rich, descriptive data suggest transferability or application of the findings to other sites or cases.

The case academic department was housed within a business school at a R1 (high research activity) university and had financial ability to partner with an OPM. The OPM-supported programs in the department vary in academic disciplines, but they are all nationally

ranked graduate level degree and non-degree programs meant for working professionals. There are 22 degree programs offered through this department, excluding the non-degree educational opportunities. Each program has a dedicated program manager to ensure efficiency and program quality, and this individual works as a liaison with the OPM, overseeing all program efforts. Institutional agents in similar settings may extrapolate the potential for similar results. However, the specific academic disciplines and institutional reputation were not disclosed for anonymity. Furthermore, the OPM chosen to partner with is an important consideration. Based on the document analysis, the OPM in this partnership presented innovation and transparency when outlining their services and economic model. They claimed that they differed from "conventional" OPMs which practice revenue sharing tuition models. Therefore, it is advised that institutional agents reflect on their current goals, resources, strengths, and areas of need, and conduct extensive research on OPM options before contracting in an OPM partnership as there is still a risk programs will not succeed substantially enough to cover production costs (Maloney & Kim, 2021).

If institutional agents determine a lack of transferability, they may consider organizational restructuring as an alternative to partnering with OPMs. Saba (2011) advised that "lack of organizational restructuring in educational institutions prevents them from benefiting from their investment in information technology" (p. 14). If financial resources do not support an OPM partnership but institutions are interested in developing quality online programs, institutional administrators may consider restructuring resources, personnel, and services to support the development and management of online programs in-house. They may also consider other various forms of outsourcing.

Recommendations for Future Research

This case study focused on value-co creation in one case involving one academic department and one OPM; therefore, it does not capture experiences or details of all institutional partnerships with OPMs. A future multi-case case study is recommended to produce broader generalizations. Researchers could include multiple institutions using the same OPM, multiple institutions using differing OPMs, or multiple programs using the same OPM across one institution (e.g., an institution could be studied as the case site).

Gathering qualitative data from interviewing institutional agents, OPM representatives, and students would be worthwhile to add context. Interviews would also be able to examine potential evidence of plausible rival explanations of perceived value, including the academic department's existing reputation of academic prowess and the global pandemic that occurred amidst the case study timeframe.

Studies comparing outcomes of on-ground degree programs with those of their OPM-supported online counterparts also may provide data for program evaluation or impact program infrastructure. Additionally, comparing OPM-supported programs that have internal institutional staff and OPM-supported programs that do not would further test the VCC model, especially regarding collaboration efforts needed to produce a perception of value.

Further, while this case study only included one case site, accountability for quality, innovation, and career outcomes were evidenced. Quality of postsecondary education and institutional accountability remain a forefront concept amongst stakeholders and policymakers. Quality and return on investment are critical to stakeholders in higher education, and institutional leaders must be accountable for resources used and results achieved (Hillman, 2006; Powell et al., 2012; Shelton, 2011). Value co-creation can lead to better practice and innovation (Prahalad

& Ramasway, 2004). Therefore, a study investigating whether OPM partnerships develop innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness across institutions may be worthwhile as institutional leaders are challenged and encouraged to be innovative, efficient, and effective in achieving desired student outcomes.

The recommendations for research provided focus on studies examining value to align with the study's research question. However, there are many avenues to conduct research on the general topic of OPMs and distance education. OPM arrangements could be analyzed through different interorganizational theoretical lenses such as exchange theory, contingency theory, resource-advantage theory, or resource dependency theory, all described in chapter 2. Likewise, theories related to higher education (e.g., campus ecology theories, college choice and enrollment theories, student development theories, retention and persistence theories, high-impact practices in distance education, etc.) would provide new lenses for research opportunities.

Moreover, studies investigating when partnerships start making returns on their investments would be helpful for understanding financial risk more thoroughly. Additionally, studies examining the quantifiable impact OPMs have on institutional distance enrollment and retention would be beneficial to provide further context to administrators and decision makers when addressing accountability, practices and policies related to distance education.

Conclusion

The postsecondary and distance education market is evolving, and OPM partnerships are growing across higher education. Research on the potential value of OPM partnerships (i.e., value proposition and value co-creation) within the higher education environment was warranted to increase transparency on the revelation and evolution of these partnerships. The purpose of this study was to develop an empirically based understanding of the value proposition of entities

of higher education partnering with OPMs. I accomplished this objective through an in-depth, revelatory case study of value co-creation as experienced in the partnership between a doctoral research institution, specifically an academic department, and its OPM provider. The partnership was analyzed to understand and reveal how the academic department and OPM operated within their partnership and to what extent the partnership aligned with the dimensional elements of value co-creation. Because findings aligned positively with the VCC model, it was concluded that the value proposition was met in this case partnership. The alignment, supported by examples that emerged in data analyses, evidenced how value was co-created in the partnership.

While this case study evidenced how OPMs co-create value with institutional partners, distance education continues to progress and challenge how we conceptualize higher education and the delivery of education. Multiple generations of distance education demonstrate that innovative practices, partnerships, and technology have historically altered the way we think about and offer higher education. OPM partnerships exist in the present generation of distance education, and how higher education institutions respond to these partnerships will impact future online educational practices. Courtney and Wilhoite-Mathews (2015) claim that as the progression of distance education continues to evolve, "all aspects of distance education (instructional design, teaching, pedagogy, etc.) become integral to furthering the field" (p. 263). They state that a fervent interest in the possibilities of online learning will shape the next generation of distance education (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015).

REFERENCES

Alexander, E. (1995). How organizations act together: Interorganizational coordination in theory and practice. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315075822

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2017). Digital learning compass: Distance education enrollment report 2017. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/digtiallearningcompassenrollment2017.pdf

Alliantist, Ltd. (2022). ISO 27001 certification simplified. Retrieved from https://www.isms.online/iso-27001/certification/#:~:text=What%20is%20ISO%2027001%20Certification,which%20technical%20controls%20to%20implement..

Ayers, D. F. (2005). Neoliberal ideology in community college mission statements: A critical discourse analysis. *The Review of Higher Education, 28*(4), 527-549.

Babson Survey Research Group. (2016). Grade increase: Tracking distance education in the United States. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/highered.html

Bartem, R., & Manning, S. (2001). Outsourcing in higher education: A business officer and business partner discuss a controversial management strategy. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 33*(1), 42–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091380109601777

Biddix, J. P. (2018). Research methods and applications for student affairs. Jossey Bass.

B Lab. (2022). About B Corp Certification. Retrieved from https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/certification.

Blumenstyk, G. (2019, March 26). College leaders are getting serious about outsourcing. They still have plenty of concerns, too. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/College-Leaders-Are-Getting/245978

Bonsu, S. K., & Darmody, A. (2008). Co-creating second life: Market-consumer cooperation in contemporary economy. *Journal of Macromarketing, 28*(4), 355–368.

Boland, W. C. (2018). Performance funding and Historically Black Colleges and Universities: An assessment of financial incentives and baccalaureate degree production. *Educational Policy, 34*(4), 644-673.

Bowman, C., & Ambrosini, V. (2000). Value creation versus value capture: Towards a coherent definition of value in strategy. *British Journal of Management, 11*, 1-15.

Brenneman, D. W., Pusser, B., & Turner, S. E. (2006). *Earnings from learning: The rise of for-profit universities.* State University of New York Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Harvard University Press.

Burke, L. (2019, September 13). Century Foundation calls for colleges to "take control" of outsourced online programs. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/09/13/century-foundation-calls-colleges-take-control-outsourced-online

Casey, D. M. (2008). A journey to legitimacy: The historical development of distance education through technology. *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning, 52*(2), 45-51.

Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment. (2019, June 26). *For profit colleges by the numbers.* https://capseecenter.org/research/by-the-numbers/for-profit-college-infographic

Chaffee, E. E. (1998). Listening to the people we serve. In W.G. Tierney (Ed), The responsive

university: Restructuring for high performance (pp. 38-61). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cleveland-Innes, M. F. & Garrison, D. R. (2021). *An introduction to distance education: Understanding teaching and learning in a new era* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Courtney, M., & Whilhoite-Mathews, S. (2015). From distance education to online learning: Practical approaches to information literacy instruction and collaborative learning in online environments. *Journal of Library Administration, 55*(4), 261-277, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1038924

Cova, B., Dalli, D., & Zwick, D. (2011). Critical perspectives on consumers' role as 'producers': Broadening the debate on value co-creation in marketing processes. *Marketing Theory, 11*(3), 231–241.

Crawley, A. (2012). *Supporting online students: A guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating services.* Jossey-Bass.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches.* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* Sage.

Creswell, J. W. & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed.).* Sage.

Currie, J. (1998). Globalization practices and the professoriate in Anglo-Pacific and North American universities. *Comparative Education Review, 42*(1), 15-29.

Deming, D. J., Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2012). *The for-profit postsecondary school sector:*

Nimble critters or agile predators? Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment. https://capseecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ForProfit_Nimble-Critters_Feb-2012.pdf

Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2013). *The landscape of qualitative research*. Sage.

Dollinger, M., Lodge, J., & Coates, H. (2018). Co-creation in higher education: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 28*(2), 210-231, https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2018.1466756

Drees, J. M. & Heugens, P. (2013). Synthesizing and extending resource dependence theory: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management, 39*(6), 1666-1698. DOI: 10.1177/0149206312471391

Eckel, P. D. (2000). The role of shared governance in institutional hard decisions: Enabler or antagonist? *The Review of Higher Education, 24*(1), 15-39.

Field, A. (2013). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics. (4th ed.).* Sage.

Frow, P., McColl-Kennedy, J. R., Hilton, T., Davidson, A., Payne, A., & Brozovic, D. 2014). Value propositions: A service ecosystems perspective. *Marketing Theory, 14*(3), 327-351, DOI: 10.1177/1470593114534346

Galbraith, J. (1973). *Designing complex organizations*. Addison-Wesley.

Gershon, L. (2020, April 13). Three centuries of distance learning. *JSTOR Daily.* https://daily.jstor.org/three-centuries-of-distance-learning/

Gibbert, M., Leibold, M., & Probst, G. (2002). Five styles of customer knowledge management, and how smart companies use them to create value. *European Management Journal, 20*(5), 459–469.

Giroux, H. A., & Giroux, S. S. (2004). *Take back higher education: Race, youth, and the crisis*

of democracy in the post-civil rights era. Palgrave Macmillan.

Glickman, T. S., Holm, J., Keating, D., Pannait, C. and White, S. C. (2007). Outsourcing on American campuses: National developments and the food service experience at GWU. *International Journal of Educational Management, 21*(5), 440-452. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540710760219

González-Gómez, D., Jeong, J. S., Rodríguez, D. A., & Cañada-Cañada, F. (2016). Performance and perception in the flipped learning model: An initial approach to evaluate the effectiveness of a new teaching methodology in a General Science classroom. *Journal of Science and Education Technology*, *25*(3), 450–459.

Gumport, P. (1993). The contested terrain of academic program reduction. *The Journal of Higher Education, 64*, 283-311.

Graham, M. (2021). *Institutional satisfaction with online program management (OPM) providers* [dissertation]. National Louis University.

Hall, S., & Dudley, T. (2019). *Dear colleges: Take control of your online courses.* The Century Foundation. https://tcf.org/content/report/dear-colleges-take-control-online-courses/?agreed=

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism.* Oxford University Press.

Hein, A., Weking, J., Schreieck, M., Wiesche, M., Bohm, M., & Krcmar, H. (2019). Value co-creation practices in business-to-business platform ecosystems. *Electronic Markets, 29*, 503-518, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-019-00337-y

Hill, D. (2003). Global neo-liberalism, the deformation of education and resistance. *The Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies, 1*(1), 1-28.

Hill, P. (2021, December 1). OPM market landscape and dynamics: Fall 2021 updates. *Phil on*

Ed Tech. https://philonedtech.com/opm-market-landscape-and-dynamics-fall-2021-updates/

Hill, P. (2018, April 2). Online program management: Spring 2018 view of the market landscape. *E-Literate*. Retrieved from https://mfeldstein.com/online-program-management-market-landscape-s2018/

Hillman, N. (2006). The Spellings Commission and the States. *American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 3*(9).

Hiltz, S. R., & Goldman, R. (2005). *Learning together online: Research on asynchronous learning networks.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020, March 27). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause*. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning

Humphreys, A., & Grayson, K. (2008). The intersecting roles of consumer and producer: A critical perspective on co-production, co-creation and prosumption. *Sociology Compass, 2*(3), 963–980.

Hurix. (2020, February 26). Understanding the relevance of Learning Management Systems in education. *HurixDigital*. https://www.hurix.com/learning-mamangement-systems-in-education.

Jap, S. D., & Anderson, E. (2007). Testing a life-cycle theory of cooperative interorganizational relationships: Movement across stages and performance. *Management Science, 53*(2), 260-275. doi 10.1287/mnsc.1060.0610

Johnson, R. B. (1997). Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. *Education,*

118(2), 282-292.

Kim, J. (2018, July 11). 5 Misconceptions about online program management providers. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/technology-and-learning/5-misconceptions-about-online-program-management

Lambert, M. T. (2014). *Privatization and the public good: Public universities in the balance.* Harvard Education Press.

Lassonde, T. (2014). *Online orientation and leadership: An examination of student success and locus of control in an online environment* [dissertation]. Franklin Pierce University.

Lederman, D. (2021, September 16). Detailing last fall's online enrollment surge. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/16/new-data-offer-sense-how-covid-expanded-online-learning

Leem, B. (2021). An effect of value co-creation on student benefits in COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Engineering Business Management, 13*, 1-16, DOI: 10.1177/18479790211058320

Levin, J. S. (2005). The business culture of the community college: Students as consumers; students as commodities. *New Directions for Higher Education, 129,* 11- 26.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. In D. D. Williams (Ed.), *Naturalistic evaluation* (pp. 73-84). Jossey-Bass.

Lusch, R. F., & Vargo, S. L. (2006). Service-dominant logic: Reactions, reflections and refinements. *Marketing Theory, 6*(3), 281–288.

Mark, E. (2013). Student satisfaction and the customer focus in higher education. *Journal of*

Higher Education Policy and Management, 35(1), 2–10.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Maloney, E. J. & Kim, J. (2021, August 29). University risk and OPMs. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/university-risk-and-opms

McColl-Kennedy, J. R., Vargo, S. L., Dagger, T. S., Sweeney, J. C., & van Kasteren, Y. (2012). Health care customer value cocreation practice styles. *Journal of Service Research, 15*(4), 370–389.

McGuire, M. A. (2012). Subprime education: For-profit colleges and the problem with Title IV federal student aid. *Duke Law Journal, 62*, 119–160.

McKenzie, L. (2020, February 5). Key senators turn up heat on OPMs. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/02/05/online-program-management-companies-face-washington-microscope

McMillan Cottom, T. (2017, February 22). For-Profit Colleges Thrive Off of Inequality. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/02/the-coded-language-of-for-profit-colleges/516810/.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Moore, M., & Kearsley, G. (2012). Distance education: A systems view of online learning (3rd ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Murray, T. A. (2019). Partnering with an online program management company: Heresy, innovative entrepreneurship, or an evolving mind-set? *Journal of Nursing Education, 58*(2), 67- 68. doi:10.3928/01484834-20190122-01

NC-SARA. (2022). *About NC-SARA.* https://nc-sara.org/

Park, S., & Robinson, P. A. (2022). The effect of online academic coaches on supporting graduate students' performance in intensive online learning environments: A three-course comparison. *European Journal of Training and Development, 46*(1/2), 70-85.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Payne, A., & Frow, P. (2005). A strategic framework for customer relationship management. *Journal of Marketing, 69*(4), 167–176.

Payne, A. F., Frow, P., & Eggert, A. (2017). The customer value proposition: Evolution, development, and application in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 45*, 467-489, DOI 10.1007/s11747-017-0523-z

Payne, A. F., Storbacka, K., & Frow, P. (2008). Managing the co-creation of value. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 36*(1), 83–96.

Pelletier, S. G. (2018). The evolution of online program management. *Unbound: Reinventing Higher Education, Spring 2018*. https://unbound.upcea.edu/leadership-strategy/continuing-education/the-evolution-of-online-program-management/

Pera, R., Menozzi, A., Abrate, G., & Baima, G. (2021). *When cocreation turns into codestruction. Journal of Business Research, 128*, 222-232.

Perspective. (2019, July 1). *What is a good Net Promoter Score (NPS)?* https://www.customermonitor.com/blog/what-is-a-good-net-promoter-score#what-is-a-good-nps.

Poch, S. (2005). Higher education in a box. *International Journal of Educational Management, (19)*3. 246-258. Doi: 10.1108/09513540510591020

Powell, B. A., Suitt Gilleland, D., & Pearson, C. L. (2012). Expenditures, efficiency, and

effectiveness in U.S. undergraduate higher education: A national benchmark model. *The Journal of Higher Education, 83*(1), 102-127. Doi: 10.1080/00221546.2012.11777236

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2000). Co-opting customer competence. *Harvard Business Review, 78*(1), 79–90.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2003). The new frontier of experience innovation. *MIT Sloan Management Review, 44*(4), 12–18.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18*(3), 5–14.

Probst, B., & Berenson, L. (2014). The double arrow: How qualitative social work researchers use reflexivity. *Qualitative Social Work, 13*(6), 813-827.

Qualtrics. (2022). What is NPS? Your ultimate guide to Net Promoter Score. https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/customer/net-promoter-score/.

Ramani, S. (2020). *The impact of a university/online program management provider partnership on faculty approaches to teach design: A case study using activity theory* [dissertation] Claremont Graduate University.

Ranjan, K. R., & Read, S. (2016). Value co-creation: Concept and measurement. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 44*, 290-315, DOI 10.1007/s11747-014-0397-2

Saba, F. (2011). Distance education in the United States: Past, present, future. *Educational Technology, 51*(6), 11–18.

Sarker, S., Sarker, S., Sahaym, A, & Bjorn-Andersen, N. (2012). Exploring value cocreation in relationships between an ERP vendor and its partners: A revelatory case study. *MIS Quarterly, 36*(1), 317-338.

Saunders, D. B., (2010). Neoliberal ideology and public higher education in the United States.

Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, 8(1), 42-77.

Schibik, T. J., & Harrington, C. F. (2004). The outsourcing of classroom instruction in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 26*(3), 393–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080042000290230

Seaman, J. E., Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2018). Grade increase: Tracking distance education in the United States.

Sigalas, C, Economou, V. P., & Georgopoulos, N. B. (2013). Developing a measure of competitive advantage. *Journal of Strategy and Management, 6*(4), 320-342, DOI 10.1108/JSMA-03-2013-0015

Singh, V., & Thurman, A. (2019). How many ways can we define online learning? A systematic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018). *American Journal of Distance Education, 33*(4), 289-306, DOI: 10.1080/08923647.2019.1663082

Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state and higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Smith, B. & Eng, M. (2013). MOOCs: A learning journey. In S. K. S. Cheung et al. (Eds.): *ICHL 2013, LNCS 8038* (pp. 244-255). Spring-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.

Solanki, V. (2022, January 31). LMS in education overview and examples. *Study.com.* https://study.com/learn/lesson/lms-education-overview-examples.html.

Sperling, J., & Tucker, R. W. (1997). *For-profit higher education*. Transaction Publishers.

Sumner, J. (2010). Serving the system: A critical history of distance education. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance, and e-Learning, 15*(3), 267–285.

Swagler, R. M. (1978). Students as consumers of postsecondary education: A framework for analysis. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs, 12*(2), 126-134.

Tozzi, C. (2021, March 5). Mainframe history: How mainframe computers have changed over the years. *Precisely*. https://www.precisely.com/blog/mainframe/mainframe-history

Turner, R. S. (2008). *Neoliberal ideology: History, concepts and politics.* Edinburg University Press.

United States Government Accountability Office. (2022). *Higher education: Education needs to strengthen its approach to monitoring colleges' arrangements with online program managers.* GAO-22-104463

U.S. Department of Education. (2012). *Program integrity questions and answers: Incentive compensation.* U.S. Department of Education. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2009/compensation.html

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. (2017). *Educator resources: Document analysis worksheets.* https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 68*(1), 1–17.

Vargo, S. L., Maglio, P. P., & Akaka, M. A. (2008). On value and value co-creation: A service systems and service logic perspective. *European Management Journal, 26*(3), 145–152.

von Hippel, E., & Katz, R. (2002). Shifting innovation to users via toolkits. *Management Science, 48*(7), 821–833.

Vivek, S. D., Dalela, V., & Sohail Ahmed, M. (2021). A framework for partner engagement: Episodes in the life of interorganizational partnerships. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice.* DOI: 10.1080/10696679.2021.1916398

Wedemeyer, C. A., & Najem, R. E. (1969). *AIM: From concept to reality. The Articulated Instructional Media Program at Wisconsin.* Institute of Education Sciences.

Wellen, R. (2005). The university student in a reflexive society: Consequences of consumerism and competition. *Higher Education Perspectives, 2*(1), 24-36.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage.

Yoon, Y. K., & Im, K. S. (2008). Evaluating IT outsourcing customer satisfaction and its impact on firm performance in Korea. *International Journal of Technology Management, 43*(1–3), 160–175.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Website Document Analysis Guidelines

Meet the website. Quickly scan each webpage. What do I notice first? What is the tone?
Observe its parts. Who wrote it? Review tone, words, visuals, colors used. Which are significant and why? Is it easy to navigate? What are the linked pages?
Try to make sense of it. Who is the intended audience? What is the main purpose of each page? Write a sentence to summarize each page. What was happening at the time in history this website was created? What does this tell me about the organization?
Use it as historical evidence. What did I find out from it that I might not learn anywhere else?
Evidence of VCC? Co-Production -Knowledge -Equity -Interaction Value-in-Use -Experience -Personalization -Relationship Financial

Appendix B

Observation Fieldnotes

Date/Time of Meeting	
Topic of Meeting	
Participants	
Setting/Environment	
Key content points	
Significant quotes	
Chronological events/Open coding	
Observer comments	

Appendix C

Visual Array of VCC Themes Found in Data Sources

Note: AD refers to academic department; OPM refers to online program management provider

CO-PRODUCTION

Knowledge

Definition: Sharing knowledge between consumers and the partner organization. It helps identify current and future needs, and organizations that participate in this practice are more likely to predict future market opportunities, improve established processes and create more value for the organization, consumers, the consumer's customers, and any shareholders (Gibbert et al., 2002).

Archival Records	Document Analysis	Observation Field Notes
Emergent themes suggest the sharing of knowledge to provide quality program experiences. (Ex: AD shares knowledge of university processes, while support coaches share knowledge of student circumstances needing support)	*AD Website* Knowledge was shared about all aspects related to programs, culture, events, resources, the discipline's industry, etc. for the OPM to co-construct the website *OPM Website* OPM brings data management and technology stacks, including placement platforms, to support sought out services OPM works collaboratively with institution's internal communications team for marketing Campus personnel would provide knowledge for institutional policies for student support, career services and all elements of student support- personalize orientation based on campus spirit and information, understanding student challenges and needs in specific programs, etc.	Discovery meetings: OPM shared knowledge about market opportunities, SEO, and branding strategy, while AD shared knowledge about student target audience and program specifics and goals (Ex: OPM shared market research snapshots on # of jobs, unique jobs posted, # of programs conferring in 2020, compound annual graduate rate, median salary, and 10-year job growth projections; while AD shared specific target personas and student stories for developing potential prospective student pool)

	"By augmenting existing university talents with [OPM's] top-tier program management and services, universities save money, boost quality, and increase scale without sacrificing quality." "[OPM] is dedicated to understanding your institution's mission and unique position in the marketplace, which includes the admission and recruitment processes and protocols currently being utilized. Integrating with and not simply replacing existing efforts is one of [OPM's] highest priorities. Our goal is to build upon successful existing operations while making enhancements to allow for nationwide recruitment."	

Equity

Definition: Equity refers to equal access to knowledge and resources (e.g., software platforms, data, personnel) between consumers and partner organizations.

Archival Records	Document Analysis	Observation Field Notes
Emergent themes suggest the sharing of knowledge and data to provide quality program experiences. The surveys were co-created by OPM and AD	*AD Website* RFI forms are shared data *OPM Website* Analytics available in real-time to administrators to guide institutional decision-making Highlights transparency and all data that will be provided to institutions	AD shared spreadsheet on faculty expertise and courses; OPM shared market trend data with AD OPM shared orientation blueprint and asked AD to confirm alignment with values All Zoom meetings were recorded and slide decks shared between partners

	They integrate dozens of tech tools and software systems with existing university LMS, SIS, and CRM systems. They emphasize that "protecting the privacy of students, faculty and staff by safeguarding data" will be their highest priority "Do it Together" model "We provide universities the best of both worlds: the transparency, flexibility, and control of a homegrown program, with the power and efficiency of a great network."	AD provided OPM access to the university and department marketing and branding guidelines and logos

Interaction

Definition: Interactions between consumers and partner organizations are critical to facilitating all aspects of co-production and VCC (Payne et al., 2008). Continuous dialogue and interactions should mimic the notion of an alliance relationship (Vargo et al., 2008). Consumers should be able to produce feedback at any time, on all elements related to co-production or the partnership (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Archival Records	**Document Analysis**	**Observation Field Notes**
Emergent themes suggest continuous dialogue and interactions to provide quality program experiences	*AD Website* Detailed information is on the site, suggests frequent or efficient interactions *OPM Website* While not able to gather specific interactions from the website or case study, the website highlights supplemental faculty development initiatives such as 1:1 coaching, group training and workshops, and on-demand self-paced resources specific to the institution LMS to assist	One of the "discovery" meetings was in-person on campus, and OPM personnel flew in for the visit from around the country. The positions represented for both partners (e.g., Dean, Executive Directors, Marketing VP, General Managers) suggests VCC commitment Coffee, beverages, and lunch offered in AD for OPM visit suggests hospitable interactions

	faculty who have never taught online.	All meetings, whether in person or on Zoom, included engaged discussion for both partners Able to produce feedback, input, and criticisms immediately in real time Mock marketing campaigns shared and AD feedback was given in real time

VALUE-IN-USE

Experience

Definition: Consumer's (i.e., academic department) perceived value of the product/service (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). If the experience is positive, the consumer is more likely to develop a positive relationship with the service or product, as well as with the partner organization (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003). This will later impact the consumer's behavior with the service/product (Payne et al., 2008), and whether they continue the business relationship with the partner organization or promote their services to others (von Hippel & Katz, 2002).

Archival Records	**Document Analysis**	**Observation Field Notes**
Student perception of value as found in NPS scores, emergent themes, graduate exit and alumni surveys suggests positive consumer experience Data from eight intake terms indicates continued business relationship	*AD Website* Cannot be determined by looking at this site; however, it continues to update with blogs and testimonials so it is not static; it is a living, dynamic site so collaboration must be continuing. This may either suggest a satisfactory experience of collaboration or a dissatisfactory experience if updates never feel complete *OPM Website* While not able to gather specific experiences from the website, the website highlights the support to help institutions "leverage resources and create more	OPM suggested a branding slogan and the AD responded, "that just gave me the chills!" Jokes, lunch, and casual conversations after in-person meeting OPM general manager was so engaged with AD that he was able to communicate the "uncommon denominator" (i.e., what makes the AD special for branding purposes) on behalf of the AD, and the AD wholeheartedly agreed and loved his statement. The Associate Dean of the department responded, "Well

	agile and efficient campuses, both online and on-ground programs, to eliminate silos across campus operations, thus improving capacity, efficiency, and resilience of programs."	said!" and the Executive Director responded light-heartedly, "You get paid extra today!")

Personalization

Definition: How consumers can further personalize the value proposition to their own usage (Ranjan & Read, 2016). At this stage, personalization allows consumers to additionally modify meaning, value, and usage of the service or product (Cova et al., 2011).

Archival Records	**Document Analysis**	**Observation Field Notes**
Various quantitative results tables have "N/A" indicating survey modifications over time	*AD Website* The entire website is personalized as it is specifically for the department and its culture and needs *OPM Website* OPM maintains relationship with multiple systems providers, allowing them to accommodate university needs and existing systems Mentions that needs may change with pedagogy and tech tools and data in real-time will support that "While every school and program has a different identity, the OPM team has a long track record of adapting to an institution's culture and helping it build award-winning programs that professors want to teach and students can't wait to tell their friends about."	During "discovery" meetings, OPM prompted thought provoking questions for the AD to consider about differentiators about program and curriculum – "How are they actively learning in the program?" "What are the skills acquired?" - questions addressed preferred terminology, student experience, faculty, reputational history and intended vision to fully understand program before marketing it. AD brand, network/alumni, rankings, and DE&I were similarly discussed During "creative concepts" meeting, OPM provided overarching creative concepts for marketing and branding based on knowledge shared at "discovery" meetings, including proposed ad headlines, images, and visual themes, and AD was able to provide immediate feedback

	"Each online program offered at your institution will receive a dedicated recruitment center oriented to embrace your mission and unique position in the marketplace. Enrollment Counselors are thoroughly trained, coached and monitored to ensure that the respective colleges are properly represented and prospective students adequately supported through the process." Work closely with campus personnel for career services and all elements of student support	

Relationship

Definition: The consumers' overall relationship with the partner organization, separate from individual experiences, can impact the consumers' overall perceived value of the service, product, or partnership (Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). This element ties together all other elements of VCC as it highlights the collaborative experience throughout.

Archival Records	**Document Analysis**	**Observation Field Notes**
Not directly evident from this source, but maintained positive results suggest positive relationship	*AD Website* Cannot be determined by looking at this site *OPM Website* While not able to gather specific experiences from the website, the website emphasizes collaboration (Ex: faculty are the content experts and courses are theirs; designers "collaborate; they don't mandate")	Pre- and post-meeting conversations were casual, personal, and suggested genuine interest (Ex: Executive Director in AD asked how the coach's dissertation defense went. When it was noted she passed, the ED exclaimed excitedly that she would have to send her a note of congratulations. She furthered joked that "while we support her, we don't want to lose her!") All Zoom meeting participants had cameras on

		and were evidently engaged. General friendly vibes, waves at end of calls Hugs given between individuals at in-person meeting. Discussions about going to dinner that evening.

Additional Financial Lens

Archival Records	Document Analysis	Observation Field Notes
Not evident from this source	*AD Website* Specifics about financial element of the model cannot be determined by the department website. However, upon analysis, one can easily see that it is a robust site with an RFI form and CTAs (calls for action) on each page within the website. This suggests there are more opportunities for ROI to get program leads and prospective applicants and students into OPM-supported programs *OPM Website* Their economic model is highlighted on every linked webpage within the site Economic model (overview landing page): "OPM helps universities lower costs while raising student:faculty engagement. Our systems and contracts are designed to be extraordinarily cost-effective, whether you want to run a few online programs or to create a sophisticated infrastructure to better attract	Not evident from this source

	and support students and faculty." Fee for service model explained in detail "Flexible economic model saves $15,000 to $30,000 per student vs conventional OPMs… likely to be less expensive than do-it-yourself efforts, while being far more likely to result in a high-quality program that hits enrollment targets." "We return 65-85% of tuition to the universities and their faculties." They created a link to their own College Cost Calculator and explain the methodology for any line item you are to click on. They claim to have reworked each institution's published financial data from IPEDS into a simple, one-page income statement, and administrators can generate their institution's statement and compare costs over the years against those of peer institutions "[OPM] collects a flat fee for every credit hour enrolled in programs, so we are incentivized to grow enrollments to a healthy scale. But that fee is the same regardless of how much the university charges per credit hour, so we are NOT incentivized to work	

	with expensive programs or inflate pricing." "This is a crucial difference between our model and the conventional OPM revenue share, where the most profit is made by steering students to less selective, more expensive schools. Further, conventional OPMs often require their partners to adapt to and invest in the OPM's in-house technology and marketing strategy. In doing so, they are adding stress and cost to an already exhaustive process."	

VITA

Originally from Rockford, Illinois, Britta Svoboda earned her Bachelor of Arts in Communication and her Master of Science in Education with a Higher Education Leadership concentration from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Her educational tenure at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville has been instrumental in her career. Her research interests include partnerships between higher education agents and educational technology vendors. She is incredibly grateful for her support system, including her husband, mentors, family, friends, and dogs.